

The Sermon on the Mount

The Righteousness of the Scribes & Pharisees (Matthew 5:20)

INTRODUCTION:

- I. When Jesus began proclaiming the gospel of the coming Kingdom throughout the regions of Galilee the people of His day took notice of several things.
 - A. The principles and concepts Jesus was teaching were uniquely DIFFERENT from what they had heard before.
 1. Jesus placed emphasis on their relationship with Jehovah God and on their relationship with their fellow man, rather than keeping the various closely held traditions so common among the Jews of His day.
 2. His message went deeper.
 - a. He spoke to the HEART of every man and woman.
 - b. He addressed the DEEPEST, inner-most FEELINGS and DESIRES of a person – those deep feelings and desires of the HEART that express themselves in the way we act and react toward others.

3. To Jesus, a person's relationship to God was supreme – above all other relationships.
 - a. And the keeping of God's Laws was to be done out of a deep desire from within the HEART to truly love and reverence the God BEHIND those Laws.
 - b. Merely keeping the Laws and Commandments out of habit or mindless ritual service was NOT the same as keeping the Laws and Commandments out of a deep love and reverence for God Himself.

4. When one approached the Laws and the Commandments of God with THIS attitude, they would see beyond the mere legal requirements of the Law to the very CORE INTENT of the Law.
 - a. In other words, they would see all the various ways those Laws could be applied in everyday living – not only in their relationship with God, but in their daily interaction with their fellow man.
 - b. They wouldn't merely PERFORM the Laws of God, they would begin to LIVE them out in their daily lives.
 - c. And because of their understanding of the REAL INTENT of God's Laws, they would no longer need someone to tell them

what God's intent was – they would be able to see it for themselves.

BODY:

- I. It should come as no surprise, then, that the teachings of Jesus would come in conflict with the whole philosophy of one very prominent and very powerful group of Jewish religious leaders – the Pharisees and those who were the professional students of the Law, the scribes.
 - A. The scribes and the Pharisees formed a unique bond in the days of Jesus.
 1. The PHARISEES were a religious sect of the Jews who contended for a very strict interpretation of the Law and a very strict adherence to that Law.
 2. And the SCRIBES were those who devoted their lives to studying and teaching the Law, and were therefore recognized by most of the people in that day as being able to give the most correct LEGAL interpretation of the Law.
 3. Other religious sects among the Jews in Jesus' day took a rather LOOSE interpretation of the Law – namely the Sadducees.

4. But when the common people of that day wanted to be faithful to the commandments of the Lord God, they would look to the scribes and Pharisees for leadership.
- B. However, the scribes and the Pharisees went BEYOND merely teaching the Law, they felt they were the ONLY ONES truly qualified to interpret the MEANING of the Law.
1. For example, God simply commanded in **Exodus 20:8-10** –
"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates."
 2. The Pharisees demanded a very STRICT COMPLIANCE with the Law of God that commanded the keeping of the Sabbath as a holy day in which no work would be done.
 3. But the scribes, the legal experts of their day, came up with a endless list of what they believed God meant by the word "work" – because God said, *"In it [in keeping the Sabbath day] you shall do no work!"*

4. This led to keeping the Sabbath based on the legal interpretations of MERE MEN – and those legal interpretations soon became adopted as laws themselves.
- C. Over time, the scribes and the Pharisees were looked upon as the only true teachers of the Law.
1. By the time of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees held **INDISPUTABLE SWAY** over the thoughts and religious practices of the common people.
 2. The Jew's of Jesus day were **STEEPED** in tradition – observing the endless traditional interpretations that the scribes and Pharisees gave to the Law.
 3. This led to people keeping the Commandments of God and the endless traditional interpretations of the Law simply because it was **EXPECTED**.
 - a. There was no longer a **DEEP ABIDING LOVE** for the God behind the Law and Commandments.
 - b. The Law was being kept as a matter of **TRADITION**, and NOT as a matter of deep moral and ethical conviction.
 4. And this led to the religious devotion of many of the Jews in Jesus' day to be shallow, superficial, and trivial.

- a. Their "righteousness" – their whole concept of virtue, morality and justice – was merely superficial.
 - b. There was no longer a real depth of love and conviction for God in the hearts of many of the common people – nor in the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees.
5. It should come as no surprise that Jesus proclaimed in His Sermon on the Mount: **Matthew 5:20** – *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.*
- D. Therefore, it was this shallow, trite, external form of righteousness that Jesus challenged in His teaching.
1. The gospel of the Kingdom demands that God be worshipped from the VERY DEPTHS of a loving heart, and that God's commandments be kept out of a deep and reverential fear and respect for the God behind those commandments.
 2. Jesus cast aside all the scribal interpretations of the Law, and the keeping of those endless traditions, and drew His hearers back to the very ESSENCE of God's commandments.
 3. And in doing that, Jesus came into open conflict with the scribes and Pharisees.

- E. Therefore, to truly understand how our righteousness needs to exceed "the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees" there are two things we need to do.
 - 1. First, we need to understand how Jesus defined "the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees".
 - 2. And second, we need to understand how Jesus defines the form of righteousness WE are to have.

- II. Perhaps the best definition of the superficial and trivial righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is found in **Matthew chapter 23** – when he gave His most scathing rebuke of these hypocritical religious leaders. So, how did Jesus define the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees?
 - A. First, Jesus pointed out on a number of occasions that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was **INCONSISTENT** and **CONTRADICTORY**.
 - 1. **Matthew 23:1-4** – *Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, 2 saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. 4 For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them*

on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

- a. While the scribes and Pharisees often taught the truth, they didn't consistently practice what they preached.
 - b. Jesus simply identified this kind of righteousness as HYPOCRITICAL – giving the appearance to others that they are keeping the Law, but when they were not before the public they broke virtually every commandment they demanded others to keep.
2. What about our righteousness – are we also guilty of saying and not doing?
- a. While we teach the truth of the gospel of Christ, are we failing to live it out in our daily lives.
 - b. Do we OUTWARDLY give the appearance to others that we are righteous and faithful Christians, but in reality our hearts are filled with worldliness and lawlessness?
 - c. Do we live ONE WAY before our brothers and sisters in Christ, but take on a whole DIFFERENT LIFESTYLE when we are in the world?
3. If we have to answer yes to any of these questions, then our righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the scribes

and Pharisees, it's exactly like their form of righteousness – inconsistent and contradictory.

B. Closely connected to this, Jesus also pointed out that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was ALL SHOW and NO SUBSTANCE.

1. **Matthew 23:5-7** – *"But all their works they do to be seen by men.*

They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. 6 They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, 7 greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'"

- a. They enjoyed wearing splendid religious garments that separated them from others, and they delighted in having places and titles of honor.
 - b. But it was all show. Their only motivation for appearing righteous was to be held in high esteem by others – to be looked upon as holy, godly, righteous.
 - c. They were filled with an arrogant pride, and like an actor on a stage, the scribes and Pharisees gave their greatest performance when they were in the public eye.
2. How about us – how much substance is there to our righteousness?

- a. Are we living godly, righteous lives out of a deep love for God and for Jesus Christ who died for us and paid the price for our sins on the cross?
 - b. Or do we find ourselves like an actor on a stage, giving our greatest performance of a righteous and godly man or woman only when we're in the public eye?
3. If our righteousness – our form of virtue, morality and justice – lacks substance, and is not real and genuine, then our righteousness cannot exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, it's identical to theirs.
- C. Jesus also pointed out that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was UNTRUSTWORTHY, DECEITFUL AND DISHONEST.
1. **Matthew 23:16-19** – *"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' 17 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 18 And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it. 19 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift?"*

- a. The Law commanded the keeping of oaths as if they were not just verbal agreements, but **LEGAL BINDING CONTRACTS** – they were vows made by one party to another in the presence of God as a witness to the vow or oath.
- b. But what happened if someone made an oath or a promise, and later decided they didn't want to keep that oath?
- c. The scribes and Pharisees had a solution – they taught certain oaths are not necessarily binding, and are purely arbitrary.
- d. If someone affirmed their oath by mentioning the **TEMPLE**, they were not necessarily required to keep that oath because the temple was made by the hands of mere men. But if that person swore or affirmed their oath by mentioning the **GOLD** on the temple, they **WERE** legally obligated to keep that oath since gold is a creation of God, and is therefore considered greater than the temple it adorns.
- e. The same held true if one swore by the **ALTER** which was also made by the hands of men. He was not required to keep that oath if he chose not to.

- f. However, a man was obligated to keep any oath made by swearing by the GIFT OR SACRIFICE on the alter since it is not only the creation of God but a sacrifice dedicated to God.
 - g. In other words, if a man had no intention of keeping his word, or was dishonest and deceitful, he would carefully frame his oath or covenant in such a way as to provide a legal loophole.
2. What about us – how honest are we? How well do we keep our word, our promises, our verbal commitments?
- a. How willing are we to do what the Psalmist praises: Psalms 15:4 – *He who swears to his own hurt and does not change.*
 - (1). This is someone who keeps their word no matter how much hardship or suffering it may cause – they will keep their word no matter how much it hurts.
 - b. Do we keep our word when we make a promise, or do we look for a way out by saying something like, “Well... I didn’t mean it that way” or “I know what I said, but circumstances have changed”?
 - c. Failure to keep our vows, covenants and promises, especially if we never really intended to, is nothing short of lying and being deceptive and untruthful.

- d. It's one thing if we make a promise rashly, without thinking of what this promise is going to require of us later, verses making a promise we never intend to keep.
 - e. Under the Law of Moses those who make hasty ill-thought-out vows are still required to keep them – failure to do so was a sin and required an open confession of that sin and an offering to God for having committed such a sin.
 - f. So what about our vows or promises, or commitments to family (husbands and wives vowing life-long faithfulness), or to friends (carrying through on commitments we've made), or to employers (fulfilling our obligation to be honest in all things and doing a complete days work for a days pay), or to lending institutions such as credit card companies (paying our bills on time and in the amounts we agreed to pay) – how honest are we about keeping our word?
3. If we break our vows, or make them with no intention of actually keeping them, then our righteousness is no different from the shallow, superficial righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.
- D. Jesus revealed another aspect of the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees – their righteousness and their faithfulness to the Law was **SELECTIVE AND LEGALISTIC.**

1. **Matthew 23:23-24** – *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"*
 - a. The scribes and Pharisees had lost sight of what it means to LIVE the Laws and Commandments of the Lord.
 - b. They were experts at keeping their traditional INTERPRETATIONS of the Law, thinking their righteousness before God would be based on how well they kept the traditions of the Fathers.
 - c. But in the process, they placed GREATER EMPHASIS on EXTERNAL things such as tithing, and neglected those areas that are far more important, such as being honest, just and fair, extending mercy and forgiveness to others caught in sin, and being faithful to Jehovah God in all things.
 - d. As long as they were fulfilling all the EXTERNAL, PHYSICAL ASPECTS of the Law – things they were to DO – they weren't concerned about the INTERNAL CONDITION OF THE

HEART toward their fellow man, nor the LEVEL of their true devotion and faithfulness to God.

- e. And, to make matters worse, they would CHASTISE someone who didn't keep the EXTERNAL things as well as they did, but would have no sense of guilt about the INNER condition of their own heart.
2. So, what about us – how quick are we to focus our attention on issues that are far less important than our relationship with God and with one another.
- a. I can assure you that if brethren had a true, genuine love for their brothers and sisters in Christ, and were more concerned about putting the welfare of others before their own, and truly loved the Lord God with all their heart, soul, mind and spirit, there would be no division among brethren – we would live and worship in peace and harmony.
 - b. The divisions that occur within the body of Christ are not so much over doctrinal differences as they are over a failure to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and a failure to bear with the infirmities of the weak, rather than nail them for every little mistake they make.

3. If we pride ourselves for being faithful in maintaining doctrinal purity, and yet harbor bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness, or a judgmental attitude toward some of our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we are no different from the scribes and Pharisees whose righteousness was selective, external, and legalistic.
- E. Finally, Jesus exposed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees as MERELY A MASK to hide their real fleshly, worldly nature. In other words, their righteousness was SIMPLY HYPOCRISY.
1. **Matthew 23:25-28** – *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."*
 - a. No matter how righteous and pious they may have appeared on the OUTSIDE, inwardly they were:
 - (1). Full of extortion (resorting to force to get their way).

- (2). Full of self-indulgence (always seeking to satisfy the sinful and inordinate desires of the flesh)
 - (3). Full of uncleanness (ethically and morally corrupt).
 - (4). Full of hypocrisy (constantly living a lie – pretending to be something they weren't).
 - (5). Full of lawlessness (having no real desire to fulfill any of the righteous requirements of the Law).
- b. They used their piety and their public displays of righteousness to mask the real person they were on the inside.
2. What about us – are we living the lie?
- a. Do we make an outward show of piety and devotion to the Lord when, in fact, our hearts are far from Him?
 - b. Do we hide who we really are – sinners who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ – and try to convince others we are actually above sin.
 - c. Are we quick to see or to point out the sins in others, but can't seem to see sin in our own life?
3. If we are any of these things, then our righteousness is just as shallow, hypocritical and fake as that of the scribes and Pharisees.

- F. In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Albert Barnes has this to say about the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.
1. "Their righteousness consisted in outward observances of the ceremonial and traditional law. They offered sacrifices, fasted often, prayed much, were punctilious about ablutions [ceremonial washings], and tithes, and the ceremonies of religion, but neglected justice, truth, purity, and holiness of heart. The righteousness that Jesus required in his kingdom was purity, chastity, honesty, temperance, the fear of God, and the love of man. It is pure, eternal, reaching the motives, and making the life holy." (Barnes' Notes – Matthew 5:20)
 2. This is why Jesus told His disciples: **Matthew 5:20** – *"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."*
 - a. This must have come as a SHOCK to those hearing Jesus that day on the mount.
 - b. The common people looked to the scribes and Pharisees as being at the very PINNACLE of righteousness, and now Jesus is telling His listeners that their righteousness must EXCEED theirs.

- c. The word "*EXCEED*" is a word that describes a river that is no longer held in by the narrow bounds of its banks, but overflows its banks and spreads out in all directions.
- d. That's the kind of righteousness Jesus demanded of His disciples then, and it's the same kind of righteousness He demands of us today.
- e. Or as Albert Barnes put it: "The righteousness that Jesus required in his kingdom was purity, chastity, honesty, temperance, the fear of God, and the love of man. It is pure, eternal, reaching the motives, and making the life holy."

Conclusion:

- I. In the verses that follow Matthew chapter 5 verse 20, Jesus will begin a lengthy discourse beginning with verse 21 and concluding with verse 48.
 - A. Throughout THESE verses Jesus will contrast what the Law of Moses required with the kind of person He expects of all who would be citizens in His kingdom.
 - 1. Jesus will get down to the very ESSENCE of what it means to be righteous.
 - 2. He will reveal that righteousness isn't simply EXTERNAL COMPLIANCE with the Law of God, but goes to the internal

condition of our heart that motivates us to be compliant with the Law of God.

3. He will challenge His listeners with revelation that spells out what it means to be righteous. It's not so much avoiding sin as it is having the right attitude in our hearts, and doing what is right.

II. If you had to compare YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS to that of the scribes and Pharisees, how would you come out?

A. We've seen that THEIR RIGHTEOUSNESS was:

1. Inconsistent and contradictory because they don't practice what they preach.
2. Was all show and had no substance because their pride of being esteemed by others led them to be like an actor on a stage, giving their greatest performance when they were in the public eye.
3. Untrustworthy, deceitful and dishonest because they didn't keep their word.
4. Selective and legalistic because they placed a greater emphasis on external worship than they did on how they treated others.
5. Merely a mask to hide their real fleshly, worldly nature because inwardly they were sinners who could see the sins of others but not their own.

- B. Jesus simply wants us to see ourselves for who we really are – sinners who need forgiveness by the grace of God and through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ.
1. If that's how you see yourself, and you know you need to receive the forgiveness of your sins by God's amazing grace, and through the sacrificial blood of Jesus, that opportunity is being extended to you right now.
 2. If you've never come to Christ, then...
 3. If you have come to Christ in the past, but have allowed that relationship to become stained with unforgiven sin, then...