

## EXCEEDING THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE MOST RIGHTEOUS

Last week I began a series entitled “Defining and Understanding Biblical Terms.” Although that is a rather “clunky” name for the title of a series, it does capture what it is I’m attempting to do—examine the meaning and significance of Bible terms that we don’t use very often in our daily conversations.

We began with the terms *righteous* and *righteousness*. *Righteous* comes from the Greek word *dikaios* and is used in reference to men, God, Jesus, and sometimes things. In the Graeco-Roman world, it was applied to a model citizen and meant that they were good, honest, just, law-abiding, and upright.

We noted that a person can be righteous in regards to the laws of **men**—like having a perfect driving record—but still not be a **perfect** person. We also looked at Paul’s ability to keep the law of God before he was saved. Paul gives us some of his biography in his letter to the Philippians; in 3:6 he wrote: <sup>6</sup>Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the **righteousness which is in the law, blameless.**” His ability to outwardly keep the law of God didn’t make him perfect, however, because if it had he wouldn’t have needed to be saved!

Lastly, we looked at the parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18 and noted that although the Pharisee was *outwardly* righteous—he fasted 103 times more in a year than the law required and gave a tenth of *everything* he possessed to God—he still had an **evil** heart. He went to the temple to pray—which is obviously a good thing—and his prayer even started out good: “God, I thank thee....” but it wasn’t long before his “holier than thou attitude” came out. “God, I thank thee that I am **not as other men are**” he prayed, then after listing some sins which he outwardly avoided, he added “or even as this publican.”

Jesus undoubtedly shocked His listeners when He concluded with this verdict: The “bad” man went home saved; the “good” man went home lost! What a wonderful parable of both comfort and conviction!

“Comfort” to those who recognize they cannot save themselves and come to God asking for—and receiving—mercy;

“Conviction” to those who think their good works will save them after Jesus plainly shows them they won’t!

This morning I want to again look at this concept of righteous and righteousness. Please take your Bibles and turn to Matthew 5:17-20. Title of my message comes from verse 20: *Exceeding the Righteousness of the Most Righteous*

### **1. The Standard of Righteousness**

Were the scribes and Pharisees “righteous?” Were they morally upright? Were they religious? They most certainly were! In fact, an old Jewish saying was that if only two people were allowed into heaven, one would be a scribe; the other a Pharisee! Jesus is not saying that you have to be a little better than the *worst* people you know—He is saying you need to be better than the best people you know!

If we are going to exceed the righteousness of the scribe and the Pharisees, we need to know what the characteristics of their righteousness is. Why were they considered the religious elite of their day? What did they do that made them righteous?

#### Let’s consider first, A. The standard of the scribes and Pharisees

What was the standard—the measuring stick—that the Pharisees compared themselves to? In a nutshell, they emphasized the outward—the letter of the law—and not the spirit or heart of the law. We know that primarily from Jesus and what He said about them. We’re here in Matthew; let’s turn to chapter 23.

--Notice first Mt 23:23, a verse we looked at last week. They were so exact in keeping the letter of the law that they tithed on spices, but they missed the “weightier matters”—the big picture of the law—which Jesus says is “judgment, mercy, and faith.”

--In vs 25 we again see their emphasis on the external—the outside (read). “Ye **make clean the outside** of the cup and of the platter, **but within** they are full of extortion and excess.”

--Verse 27 “...for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful **outward**, **but are within** full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.”

--Verse 28 “Even so ye **outwardly appear righteous unto men**, **but within** ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.”

We as Christians—and us Baptists in particular—can become like Pharisees, can’t we? We can pride ourselves in what we believe—and we can pride ourselves in how we *live out* our beliefs. We are proud that we “don’t drink, smoke or chew, or run with girls (or boys) that do.” We set up standards of righteousness—just like the Pharisees—and look down on those that don’t keep our standards the way we do. And all too often we get good at keeping the **letter** of the law—following a list of do’s and don’ts—but fail to have a relationship with Him. God wants our heart, doesn’t He? “God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

### B. The standard of Christ

The standard of Christ is higher than that, isn’t it? It is more than the outward—it entails the **heart**. Jesus implies that very thing here in **Matthew 23:26**: “Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is **within** the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.” Simply put, you can keep the outside clean and not have the heart effected—but if the **heart** is clean, the outside will be clean as well.

----Let’s go back to Matthew 5 and see the emphasis Jesus has on the Spirit of the law and not just the letter.

#### **i. Jesus was in favor of keeping the law**

Man-made traditions had replaced God’s Word so much that Jesus was accused of being a law-breaker instead of being recognized as a *law-keeper*!

--Mt 5:17 Jesus assures them that He did not come to destroy the law—He came to fulfill it!

--In v 19, Jesus emphasizes the importance of keeping the law. It is **not** okay to have a flippant attitude regarding sin; it is not okay to have the attitude that “it’s under the blood” or “Jesus loves me unconditionally so it doesn’t matter how I live.” It **does** matter how we live!

--If you break the least of the commandment and teach others that it is okay to follow suit, you shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

--If you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, you need to do the commandments and teach others to do them as well

--I want to give a disclaimer, however—Christians are **not** under the Mosaic Law! We do not keep the Jewish feasts, we do not keep the ceremonial, civil, or sacrificial laws, and we do not keep the Sabbath. Are we “lawless,” then? Not even close! “God forbid,” as Paul would say—and does say—in Romans 6:2.

**I Corinthians 9:20-21** “And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are **under the law, as under the law**, that I might gain them that are under the law; <sup>21</sup>To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.”

Paul says in the middle of verse 20 that he has the choice to subject himself to the law in order to win those under the law; and in verse 21 he can choose to be free from the law. If he can choose to be *free* from it, he is obviously not **obligated** by it or to it!

He wasn’t lawless, however; he was “not without law to God.” The law he was under was not the law of Moses, though—it was the law of **Christ**. Ryrie writes: “In the law of Christ are the hundreds of commandments of the New Testament epistles, and together these form a new and distinct code of ethics.” (Ryrie, *The End of the Law*, 236).

## ii. Jesus' standard was higher than the letter of the law

Several times in Matthew 5 we see Jesus demonstrating that He was more concerned with the Spirit of the law than the letter of the law. How does He do that? He does it by using a "formula" (for lack of a better word) that goes like this: "Ye have heard...but I say unto you..."

**Mt 5:21-22** "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill...But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry..."

The standard of Jesus was not just to avoid killing—it was to avoid being *angry*!

**Mt 5:27-28** "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery, But I say unto you, That whosoever **looketh** on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." The standard of Jesus was not just to avoid **physical touching** of someone else's wife—it was an avoidance of even **mentally desiring** someone else's wife—or someone in a magazine or on the computer screen!

## iii. Jesus' standard was the perfection of the Father

Look at **Matthew 5:48** "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Why did Jesus say that?

1. Was Jesus implying we could have sinless perfection in this life?

No; we know from other verses that that is not possible.

2. Was Jesus saying it as a goal we should attempt to reach, even though it is unattainable?

Possibly; **I Pet 1:15-16** says "But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation (living); Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy."

3. Or was Jesus showing us that God's standard is higher than **any** human can reach and we need God's forgiveness and mercy if we are to have any hope of entrance into heaven? That's true, isn't it?

**Galatians 3:24** "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith." Faith—not baptism, not belonging to a certain church, not works which we do...FAITH!

## 2. The source of righteousness

### A. Pharisees source of righteousness

What was the source of their righteousness—their goodness and uprightness and ability to keep the law?

What did they depend on? We noted last week from the parable in Luke 18 that they depended on **themselves**; they depended on **their** efforts and **their** will power.

--He was thankful that he was not like others—an extortioner or an adulterer or like the publican

--And he was thankful for what he did do—fast and pray and tithe

The Pharisees trusted in their wisdom and their works to make themselves right with God. Was that enough?

Obviously not because Jesus says in our verse that we need to *exceed* their righteousness in order to get into heaven.

How can we have a different source than what they had? They are men; we are men. If the **best** efforts of the **best** person are not **good enough**, how do we exceed that? If the answer is not found **in us** and what **we do**, it has to be **outside** of us!

### B. God's source of righteousness

God's Word is plain; we need **His** righteousness:

**Romans 10:3** "For they being **ignorant of God's righteousness**, and going about to **establish their own righteousness**, have not submitted themselves unto the **righteousness of God.**"

What is the righteousness of God? The Bible also tells us that. Notice again your sheet:

**Romans 10:4** "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth."

God left heaven in the person of His Son and lived a perfect life, then died in our place—He died as our Substitute.

**II Corinthians 5:21** “For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.”

Our sin was placed on Him and He died to pay the penalty so we don't have to. That's only half of what happened, though. His righteousness—His rightness; His perfection—was that given to us. Isaiah gives us a beautiful picture of this:

**Isaiah 61:10** “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.”

Lastly, let's consider....**3. The strength of righteousness**

A. The strength of man's righteousness

What were the accomplishments of the righteousness of the Pharisees? What effects did it produce? What was it able to obtain for them?

**i. Appearance of godliness with no change of heart**

We already looked at this, didn't we? In Mt 23:28, Jesus told them they “**appeared righteous** unto men, but **within** were full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” Why? Because they had no change of heart!

**Luke 6:45** “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.” In order to have a good heart, we need to have a new heart—and only God can give us one!

Man's efforts to be righteous are not only weak because the heart is not changed; they are also worthless because they don't get you to heaven!

**ii. Assumption of goodness with no chance of heaven**

The Pharisees assumed their goodness would get them to heaven, but Jesus couldn't have said it any plainer: “...except your righteousness **shall exceed** the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case—in no way—enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20).

--Sadly, the Pharisees are **not the only** ones who have this false assumption.

--Millions of people are counting on their “goodness” to “outweigh” their badness on a scale that doesn't exist! They are on the broad way that leads to destruction and don't even know it.

--How horrible to anticipate heaven and expect heaven and, like the rich man, wake up in hell, “being in torments.”

What is the strength of man's righteousness? It is ineffective, unprofitable, and weak. It leads to a fake godliness...and a false hope of heaven...and an eternity in hell!

B. The strength of Christ's righteousness

What is the strength of Christ's righteousness? What does it do?

**i. It changes our heart by giving us a new nature**

**II Corinthians 5:17** “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

Rowland Hill was a preacher in England at the same time Spurgeon was. A drunk man said he was a convert. “You must be a convert of **mine**—you aren't God's” (CHS, Soul-Winner, 37). I wonder if we preachers get it wrong sometimes when we don't challenge people enough about their salvation when there is no heart change.

**ii. It changes our destiny by guaranteeing us heaven**

See I John 5:11-13

**Romans 10:13** “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

**I Peter 1:4** “To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you,” The only people who can have a know-so salvation are the ones who are counting on Jesus to get them there—not themselves. Whose righteousness are you counting on to get to heaven?

***CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:***

1. Whose righteousness are you counting on to get to heaven? I don't know, but **you** do—and so does God! You will NEVER be good enough to get to heaven without Christ's righteousness given to you.
  
2. Child of God, what does Jesus know about you? What would He say about you?
  - Would He say you are like a tomb—beautiful on the outside, but full of deadness on the inside?
  - Or would He say, “You are bringing forth good fruit because your heart has been changed?”