**Righteousness of the Heart**

Based on [Matthew 5:17-26](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt5.17-26)

Preached on July 28, 2019

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

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“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God.”

Without a certain type of righteousness you will not be allowed into heaven. This may sound harsh, but so does a cancer diagnosis…it doesn’t make it any less real. A foolish person hates knowledge, but a wise person receives it. So open your ears, and hear the word of the Lord about the righteousness that qualifies you for eternal life. The righteousness, not of external works…but of faith in the heart.

The righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes is a real righteousness. It is good, helpful, and in a sense holy. It is what leads to a peaceful society and brings a sort of order out of chaos. It is concerned primarily, if not only, about people *doing* the right thing. It is a righteousness of works.

Most people think the Pharisees and scribes were terrible. And they were, because they rejected Jesus and plotted to have him killed. But they did have good outward reasons. Jesus made himself equal with God, which was blasphemy; **and king of the Jews, which was sedition and treason.** And though *their hearts* should have known better--in a purely *outward* way…they were right, acting righteously. It is better for one man to die than the whole nation. Jesus was stirring up the people; he was not observing the traditions of the elders; and even if he was not rebellious…some of those following him might get the idea. The reason the Pharisees and the Scribes kill Jesus is not because they had no righteousness at all. They were certainly “better people” than Barrabas who was a robber and a murderer. They had only an outward righteousness, a righteousness of works. And even if they weren’t perfect, they kept the law outwardly much better than anyone else. In short, you would rather live next to a Pharisee than a robber or a murderer.

And, for what it’s worth, you would rather *be* a Pharisee than a murderer or robber. Because a righteousness of works is good as far as it goes, it is good enough for earth, even if it won’t get you into heaven… If your wife needs a hug, but you don’t feel like giving it to her…hide your slothful or angry heart behind a veneer of good works. Yes, be a hypocrite!...and hug her anyway…even though your heart is still sinning. It is the right thing to *do*.

And if you don’t feel like going to church on Sunday morning, go anyway. Maybe you think you’d be a fake if you go to church without feeling it, or you think that you don’t need to go to church to earn God’s grace. Well you’re right… If you go to church even if you don’t want to you are a fake…and going to church is of no heavenly credit to you. But go anyway. Christ commands it; and it’s where he promises to make an appearance for supper to sanctify so that in the future, you will worship him with a pure heart.

Someone who has only a righteousness of works is a hypocrite, but it is better to be a hypocrite than a shameless sinner. It is better to resist doing evil than to give into it. And yet there is still a more excellent way…

Jesus condemns the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes…not because it was evil, but because it wasn’t enough. **Doing the right thing is enough for the world, but it is not enough for heaven.**  Those who do the right thing, *without loving the right thing* are wrong, or only half-righteous. They are righteous before men, but that is not the righteousness required for heaven. The righteousness required for heaven is a righteousness of the heart. And even if you always did the right thing for your neighbor and you always did the right thing for God…if your heart despises them, your righteousness is pharisaical. The Pharisees taught that doing good made you good, regardless of where your heart was at. And in so doing, they didn’t harden God’s law…they softened it. They didn’t make God’s law more severe, they made it more lenient. They didn’t increase God’s law, actually, they *relaxed* it.

So Jesus says of them, “**Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.**” It is a popular myth in Christianity to teach as though God’s law in the Old Testament was strict, and that Jesus came and relaxed the law. No, Jesus says those who relax even the smallest commandment, are considered small in righteousness. Instead, he teaches, “**Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven**.”

There is a greater righteousness. A righteousness that doesn’t simply *do* the right thing with the arms and legs, but believes the right thing with the heart. The one who “believes right” is righteous. The one who *believes right* believes he is a sinner, that his sin deserves eternal damnation, and that he is powerless to do enough to win heaven. Such a one *believes* that if he were to ever enter the kingdom of heaven, it would have to be through the work of someone else. The one who *believes right* has heard and believed that Jesus *is* that “someone else” who found a narrow way into heaven for all who believe. The one who *believes right* believes with their heart that Jesus paid the debt of his sin and so his sins are forgiven. And you will be able to recognize such a forgiven person, for the one who *believes* he is forgiven much loves much. (Luke 7:47).

“**All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, *to be received by faith*.**” When Jesus is received by faith, he creates love in the heart, which is evidence of a righteousness that exceeds all works. “**But now *apart from the law* the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe**.” (Romans 3:21-22)

Only through the righteousness of faith will you enter the kingdom of God. And through that righteousness, your cup overflows in love. Far from being angry at other sinners, you want them to know the way, and you want them to have Christ too, and nothing else matters. Revenge, who cares? Anger, what’s the point? Success and friendship with the world…it’s passing away. Making a name for yourself?...Your name is already in the book of life…what more is there? Christ has prepared a perfect kingdom with many rooms and has given you one. Why would you put all your time and energy investing stocks and bonds in this world just because you happen to live there now? This world is passing away; but you have heaven waiting for you. Spend your time here, the way you will be spending eternity, not in malice, rancor, envy or strife, but in the Spirit, who produces love, peace, kindness and rejoicing. This is the kind of righteousness that *will inherit* heaven, because it is the righteousness *of* heaven.