

“Real Righteousness” Matthew 5:17-26

Trinity 6 July 18 & 19, 2009

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

True or False? “As long as you try your hardest to be good and do your best to keep the commandments, God will accept that and give you eternal life.” The statement is false. That is the theology of those who say, “God helps those who help themselves.” You do your part and God will take care of the rest and do whatever is beyond your ability to accomplish. You show you're sincere, you do something for God, and God will in turn do good to you and bless you. In effect, you and God work together to achieve your salvation. There's a theological word for that. It's called “**synergism**,” which means “**working together**.” I do my part, God does His part, everything's taken care of. There's just one problem. Synergism is a heresy, a false teaching. And if the surveys are right, it's a pretty popular heresy. Even something like 40% of people who call themselves Lutherans agree with the synergistic statements I've just been enunciating.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus explicitly rejects and condemns synergism when He says, “**Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.**” It's not just that you've got to do to the best of your ability and try your hardest. It's that you've got to do better than those who were the very best at keeping the Law. The Pharisees dedicated their whole lives to knowing and keeping God's commands down to the finest detail. For instance, you think it's hard to tithe and give 10% of your income in offerings. Most of you struggle to give even 3 or 4%. Well, the Pharisees would not only tithe of their income but of all that they possessed, even down to the herbs they would use to prepare their meals. They strove to keep God's Law perfectly, even making up some of their own laws along the way.

<!--[if !supportLineBreakNewLine]-->
<!--[endif]-->

Jesus basically is saying here, you've got to do even better than that, otherwise you've got no chance of entering the kingdom of heaven. Even the Pharisees don't make it. Even the godly church people come up short. In the Old Testament God summarized what He demands when He said, “**Be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.**” And Jesus Himself taught in this same Sermon on the Mount, “**You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.**” Holiness and perfection. That's what the Law requires. Anything less than that isn't good enough.

James 2 makes this point very clearly. It says, “**Whoever keeps the whole Law, yet fails in just one point, He is guilty of all of it.**” It's sort of like a balloon. It may only bump into that one little sharp object. Only one little portion of the balloon may be pierced. And yet the result is that the whole thing pops and is ruined. One hole ruins the entire balloon.

That's how it is with God's Law. Even if you were able to keep all of the Law except in one area, that one point brings down the whole structure of the Law. For the Law all hangs together in love for God and for the neighbor. You can't just say, “**Oh, I did that a long time**

ago when I was young and foolish; I've gotten my act together now.” Or, “Oh, I was just tired and stressed out and in a bad mood when I lost my temper; you can't hold that against me.” Failing in one point is failing in all points.

The one point that Jesus focuses on in today's Gospel is the 5th commandment, **“You shall not murder.”** Now I'm sure that in a civil sense, just about all of you have kept that law. But in God's sight this command requires much more than not killing someone or even not hurting someone. It also requires that you do good to your neighbor and help him in all his physical needs. When you have done something against another person, Jesus says here that you should swallow your pride and go and be reconciled to him as a matter of first priority. Confess your wrongdoing and apologize sincerely. And when he has done something against you, you are not to hold a grudge and refuse to speak to him and seek some sort of revenge. Rather you are to forgive and be merciful. Jesus shows us here that the 5th commandment has to do not only with deeds but even also with words and the desires of the heart. He says that anger toward your brother and hostile, spiteful words put you in danger of the judgment of hell. It is written, **“Whoever hates his brother is a murderer.”** Not just the outward act, but also the inward desire is sin. For all sin begins in the heart.

That's why Jesus called the Pharisees, **“whitewashed tombs,” “well taken care of cemeteries.”** Outwardly they were clean and pure, but inwardly they were full of uncleanness and dead men's bones. This is what all human righteousness is: A good looking and attractive exterior that covers nothing but rotting, stinking death on the inside. *Can you do any better than the scribes and the Pharisees?* Then you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. That's the judgment of the Law. And if you are trusting in the Law and the spirituality you've worked up for yourself, then you will be delivered to the Judge, who is Christ, and He will hand you over to the officer, who is Satan, and you will be thrown into prison, which is hell, until you have paid the last penny of what the Law requires, which you will never be able to do.

Jesus is teaching you here that you must not seek merely an outward righteousness like the Pharisees, but an inward righteousness before God, the righteousness of faith, whereby we place our confidence not in ourselves or our own goodness but in Him alone and pray the words of the Introit, **“The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped.”** Only in Christ is there deliverance from the judgment of the Law. For only Christ has performed the Law without fault or failing. Jesus said, **“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (them).”** Jesus alone has kept the Law. And He did so for you and in your place.

Our Lord fulfilled the Law in two ways. *First of all, as true God who at the same time had become fully human, Jesus never sinned,* as it is written in Hebrews, **“He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin.”** Not only did Jesus not do the things that the commandments forbid, He also did do everything the commandments demand. Not only did He not murder or steal or have impure thoughts, but He also perfectly loved His Father in heaven and His neighbor

on earth, showing compassion, healing, doing good and teaching the truth to all. Our Lord lived a holy life as our representative and our substitute, that our unholy lives might be redeemed.

Secondly, Jesus fulfilled the Law by completing all of the old ceremonial requirements regarding the Sabbath and the sacrifices and so forth. By His holy death and burial, Jesus Himself became our eternal Sabbath rest, cleansing us from our sin by His once-for-all sacrifice. All the Old Testament Jewish rules and regulations found their goal and culmination in Jesus, who put that all to an end in His crucified body, that the Law might no longer condemn us. Not only did Jesus live a perfectly godly life in our place, He also suffered on the cross the full sentence for our imperfect and ungodly lives in order to reconcile us to the Father. Our Lord is now risen from the dead that we might be freed from judgment and given new life and a sure hope.

That freedom, that new life, that sure hope are all yours in holy baptism. For St. Paul says in the Epistle that by water and the Word you were buried into Christ's death and raised with Him to a new life. His death counts as your death. The hellish judgment he experienced counts for you too. For you are united with Him if you believe and are baptized. Living in Christ, taking refuge under His wings, you are protected and kept safe from the devil and from death itself. There is no fear of hell and judgment for the faithful baptized; for Christ has already endured that in your place, for you. Judgment day for the believer is in your past. It occurred on Good Friday. The flames of hell were doused for you at the font which joined you to the cross. All there is now is the life of Christ in which you who believe share fully.

So it is that the words of Jesus which seemed to be impossible are now, in fact, true in Him: **“Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”** By faith in Christ, your righteousness does indeed exceed that of the Pharisees, for it has been given to you freely by God's grace. You have the perfect righteousness of Jesus. The Father has declared you to be holy in His sight. He didn't just demand that you straighten out your life, He gave you a whole new life, the life of Jesus that is full and complete and perfect and everlasting. Through Christ you will enter the kingdom of heaven. Believe that, and it is true.

And lest you be tempted to fall back into your old life of sin and death and the bondage of the Law and say to yourself, **“Hey, all that counts for my salvation is what Jesus did and not what I do; that means I can live however I please, right?”** To that, St. Paul says this in the Epistle, **“Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?”** How shall we who have been freed from hell's prison purposely go back and put ourselves in chains and behind bars again? That's exactly what we've been liberated from! Why would we willingly want to be anywhere near there and risk falling away from Christ?

No your old selves were crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be done away with through repentance, that you should no longer be slaves of sin. You are given to walk by faith in the newness of Christ's life. He has brought you through the Red Sea of baptism, out of the house of bondage. Therefore, reckon yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ. For just as you have been united with Him in His death, you will surely also be united with Him

in the resurrection of the body when He comes again. To Him with the Father and the Holy Spirit belongs all worship, honor, glory, and praise, forever and ever. Amen.