

The Righteousness That Exceeds

Sixth Sunday after Trinity (11 July 2010)
Saint Matthew 5:20

Dearly beloved, the pages of history are filled with men and women, boys and girls, whose righteousness never measured up.

The moment the forbidden fruit delighted their taste buds and was swallowed Adam and Eve knew something wasn't right. They recognized their nakedness. They knew right from wrong. So when they heard their holy and righteous Creator walking in the garden in the cool of the day, they foolishly tried to hide themselves. Their righteousness never measured up to God's righteousness.

The same is true of Israel's patriarchs, judges, kings, and prophets.

- ✓ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- ✓ Moses and Joshua.
- ✓ Gideon, Samson, and Deborah.
- ✓ Samuel and Nathan.
- ✓ Saul, David, and Solomon.
- ✓ Elijah and Elisha.
- ✓ Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Choose any Biblical characters you want. It does not matter. Their righteousness never measured up to God's righteousness.

How about you? Does your righteousness measure up? Ask yourself these questions. Do you love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind? Do you value His Word, His house, and His day above everything else? Do you live from every word that proceeds from His mouth? Do you love your neighbor as yourself? With no strings attached? Unconditionally? Do you love all of our corrupt politicians? Do you love the terrorist who wants to destroy you? Would you give up your life for the most vile rapist and murderer in the world? Are you ready and willing to sell all you have, give it to the poor, and take up your cross and follow Jesus? I hope the point is obvious. Your righteousness—just like my righteousness—will never measure up to God's righteousness.

In today's Holy Gospel, we hear the words of Jesus: **“I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** In Jesus' day, the scribes and Pharisees were looked up to as the superheroes of righteousness. From all outward appearances, they kept the Ten Commandments perfectly. They worshipped and prayed devoutly. They fasted twice as much as the average Jew. They even tithed over and above what was required. Now, says Jesus, your righteousness must *exceed* that of the scribes and Pharisees. That is how high the bar is set high. And just so there's no questioning what Jesus means, listen to what He says later in this same chapter: **“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”** (Mt 5:48).

Perfection. That is what Jesus demands. And the Ten Commandments are the measuring rod. So how do you measure up? This morning's Old Testament reading brought to mind all ten of God's commandments—God's perfect and holy will for you and for me.

Lest any of us foolishly believe that we have kept these commandments as God desires, Jesus uses the Fifth Commandment—**“You shall not murder”**—to demonstrate our imperfection. If this commandment simply had to do with the external act of putting another human being to death, then you could certainly boast: “I'm not the least bit guilty of murder.” But God's Law prohibits much more than the external act. That's why Jesus says, **“Everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable of judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”** As you can see, unjust anger, hatred, insults, and foul language are just as much murder as taking the life of another person. Watch your heart and your mouth, therefore, for both are very capable of murdering your neighbor.

You can see now how impossible it is for you to be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect. The Fifth Commandment uncovers your imperfections. So do the other nine. How, then, do you obtain a righteousness that *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees?

There are many who would point you back to the Ten Commandments and tell you to try harder. That's hogwash. Pointing you back to the Ten Commandments to become righteous is a death sentence. God's Law always condemns the sinner. It has no power to save. It is for that reason that I—and every truly Christian pastor—will point you, not to yourself, but to God's own Man.

God has a Man who is not a sinner, a Man who is completely righteous, a Man whose righteousness far *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees. God has a Man who never murdered—not in thought, word, or deed. God has a Man who was never unjustly angry toward His brother, who never harbored ill will or hatred against anyone, even those enemies who put Him to death. God has a Man who never wished, intended, planned, or executed evil against anyone.

This Man, of course, is Christ. All day, every day, His whole lifetime, He was completely righteous. He faced His enemies without contempt or vengeance and willingly was murdered by them to pay the penalty of your unrighteousness. Even though you have not loved God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, He was spit upon and scourged for you. Even though you do not value His Word, His house, and His day above everything else, He was nailed to the cross for you. Even though you do not live from every word that proceeds from His mouth, He was forsaken by the Father for you. Even though you do not love your neighbor as yourself, He allowed His body to be broken and His blood to be shed for you.

It is true: Your righteousness does not *exceed* that of the scribes and the Pharisees. But Christ's does. And since you have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, because He drowned your sins and clothed you in His perfect righteousness in that water connected with His Word, Christ's perfect righteousness is now your righteousness by grace. Paul says it this way: **“For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Cor 5:1). By nature, **“all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags”** (Is 64:6 NKJV). But in Christ, you have a perfect righteousness that far *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees.

That puts a whole new perspective on life, doesn't it. You now live and move and have your being in Christ. You now face everything the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh throw at you in the sure and certain confidence that the victory is yours in Christ. You now delight in God's Law and strive, in Christ, to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.

But don't ever fall into the trap of pretending to be something you are not. You do not measure up to God's standards on your own. Nor can you. That's why repentance and faith is the daily walk of the Christian. Look into the mirror of the Ten Commandments and see for yourself the sinner you are by nature. But then look to Christ and the cross, to Baptism and Absolution, to preaching and the Lord's Supper, and see yourself the way God sees you. Clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ. Now that's a beautiful sight, isn't it. For in Christ, you

have *the righteousness that exceeds*. And that means the kingdom of heaven is yours. Thanks be to God!

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

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Jesus Christ unto life everlasting.

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