



Ministry of the Word  
**Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020**  
by Vincent Gannon

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:20

**Subject:** Part 25 - Righteousness of the Kingdom

*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.*

I know that we briefly looked at this verse last week, but I thought that it needed a bit more attention. From the outset, you may be forgiven to think that there was another way to obtain entry into heaven by way of exceeding the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. To Jesus' legalistic, works-oriented hearers, this was doubtlessly the most radical thing He had yet taught. Who could be like the meticulously religious, moral, law abiding Scribes and Pharisees? Here Jesus is using hyperbole (which means to exaggerate a point to make a point) to drive home the truth—that external righteousness or religious observances will not provide an internal reality that allows entrance into Heaven or the Kingdom of God.

Righteousness means right with God, or to be upright before God. *Were the Scribes and Pharisees right with God, or upright with God?* I'm sure they believed they were.

The two things that the Bible vehemently is opposed to, among other things, is sin and the religion of human achievement. Scripture teaches that salvation can only be by faith alone, through grace alone, as you can read in Romans 4:1-25.

Romans 3 verse 10 tells us the problem: *As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one;*

But it also tells us the solution as we read in Galatians 3:22 *But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*

Jesus established the pre-eminence (v.17), permanence (v.18), and pertinence (v.19) of Scripture. In verses 17 to 19, Jesus was speaking according to the Law and the Prophets, that is the Old Testament Scriptures only, so in context, or in light of those verses we can see Jesus is now underlining what exactly righteousness is according to God, not man's interpretation or tradition. True righteousness exceeds the kind displayed by the Scribes and Pharisees.

God's law was never a means of Salvation but it did have its purposes namely - To reveal the holiness of God, to provide the rule of conduct, to reveal sin and the need of a Saviour. The law kept the Jews as a separate people, a distinct people as we see in Lev 11:44 and 45, as well as Deut. 7:6. There was an admonition that the Jewish people were to be different. So it provided Israel with an occasion to be separate and distinct from the other nations that surround them, and it provided them a mechanism whereby an individual could worship God and where they could collectively and corporately worship God.

God's law reveals sin, it was never a solution to the problem. Only Jesus is the solution. The Law reveals the character, nature, and horror of sin, and just how far we have fallen short of God's holy righteous standard. *Is there more that the Law does?* Yes! It compounds personal sin. *In what way?* Paul said that the Law serves as a course for further sin. *How?* The law isn't sinful but rather it serves as a base of operations for the carnal nature and the sinful nature of human beings. Paul argues this throughout the book of Romans - Ch 4v15; Ch5v20; Ch7v7-13; 1 Corinthians 15:30-56.

Once the law is given, sin has a basis to wage war against the human conscience; once the law is given, the carnal nature attaches to that law and then violates it. For example - Say you are walking in a park and you see the sign, 'Do not walk on the grass' what is the first thing most people think.... 'Oh really!' ....

As the Lord pointed out to the Jews in the first beatitude, the initial step towards kingdom citizenship is actually poverty of spirit, recognizing one's total wretchedness and inadequacy

before God. It is not a lifetime ability to keep the whole Law. Prior to being a believer, I never heard or was taught that, and I'm sure there are many like me and still are.

We have spent quite a lot of time in different studies explaining who the Scribes and Pharisees were (Matthew 4), so I don't intend to spend much more time going over the same ground. Suffice to say, like Ezra (Ezra 7:12), Scribes were found only among the priests and Levites. They recorded, studied, interpreted, and often taught Jewish law. Although there were Scribes among the Sadducees, but most were associated with the Pharisees.

Israel had two kinds of Scribes; Civil and Ecclesiastical. The Civil Scribes functioned somewhat like legal official's, and were involved in various governmental duties. Shimshai (Ezra 4:8) was such a Scribe. The Ecclesiastical Scribes devoted their time to study of the Scriptures or Torah, and came to be its primary interpreters and articulators. Jesus repeatedly made plain, they failed to understand what they studied and taught. Regardless of their exposure to God's Word, being intellectually immersed, they missed its profound spiritual intent. They often preached at people, believing the words were for others not for them in large measure, sure, they were righteous in their own eyes.

The influential and rigid Pharisees were particularly confident in their system of righteousness. The Jews had a saying, *"If only two people go to heaven, one will be a Scribe and the other a Pharisee."* Those men were completely convinced that God was obligated to honour their devoted and demanding works. In comparing themselves with the standards they had established—and especially in comparing themselves with the average Jew, not to mention Gentile—they could not imagine that God was not favourably impressed with their goodness. Yet, like many serious and capable scholars throughout the history of the church, the Pharisees of Judaism were blind to the meaning of the words they diligently studied and discussed.

*But in what way was the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees different to the righteousness of God?* There was a huge difference, just like all who are outside of Christ. Firstly, the Scribes and Pharisees righteousness was external. While they were meticulous with the observations of laws and traditions, they gave little consideration to motives and

attitudes. They were ticking boxes in other words. For instance, it did not matter how much they hated a person, once they did not actually kill him, they were not guilty of breaking a commandment. No matter how much they lusted, once they did not commit the physical act of adultery they were still righteous. Like so many, they believed that God would only judge them for what they did, not for what they thought. This thinking is hypocritical, deceptive, deadly, and damning to eternal destruction. God's concern is the state and condition of the heart, mind and soul. Their hearts were not faithful to God, instead they relied on looking righteous in front of others.

In Luke 18 verse 9 we see a great example of this in the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and a Tax collector. Both went in to pray, but had different motives. The Pharisee, a man who would have thought himself as a stickler for keeping the law thanked God for not being like anyone else who broke the law while the Tax collector who no-one liked could *“not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’*

Now to onlookers, they would have seen the highly regarded Pharisee as a model Jew, highly religious, moral, and respectable, therefore righteous. They would have seen the Tax collector as the least-esteemed and most-hated man in Jewish society, a sell-out to Rome as he extorted all he could get from the people, keeping for himself everything he stole above what Rome required. He had forsaken both national, social, family and religious loyalty for the sake of money. A true mercenary.

Yet Jesus said that, despite the tax-gatherer's treachery and sin, he would be justified by God because of his penitent faith, whereas the Pharisee, despite his high morals and religiousness, would be condemned, because he trusted in his own righteousness and good works. This was then and now, not good news for religious people. If the heart is not transformed by God as we see in the start of this chapter no external formality can change it.

Secondly, they only gave in partial obedience to the law. For example, while they were absorbed in the tithing of the smallest plants from their gardens, (as we see in Matthew 23:23 which wasn't specified by the law, only tradition), they had total disregard for showing justice, mercy, and love to other people.

Thirdly, they redefined the law, like many liberal theologians today. They took God's word and redefined it to suit themselves. For example Leviticus 11:44

*For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth.*

They interpreted this as a requirement to perform certain rituals but not as God intended which was for them to have a pure attitude of heart. They changed the meaning of holiness and in doing so, their understanding of it. It became self-centredness, and not God-centred. They did it for self-glory, not to glorify God. It served self, and it satisfied their made-man traditions. They shaped their religion, to provide ways to accomplish external righteousness which they could boast and be proud of their efforts. Their satisfaction came when they received approval and commendation from men.

In stark contrast, the godly person, a person who is righteous in God's eyes, is broken about their sin and mourns over the wicked condition of their inner life, and the unrighteousness that they see in their heart and mind. They have absolutely no confidence in who they are or in what they can do, but longs for the righteousness only God can give out of His mercy and grace.

Yet the person who is righteous in their own eyes, sees no need for any other righteousness, no need for salvation, mercy, forgiveness, or grace. Just as their self-righteous forefathers had not wanted the grace God offered in the Old Testament, the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day did not want the grace the Messiah now offered. They wanted to rule their own lives and determine their own destinies. They were not ready to submit to a King who wanted to rule their inner as well as their outward lives. As Romans 10 verse 3 says:

*“Not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God”*

The righteousness God requires of His kingdom citizens far surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. The term 'surpasses' is used of a river overflowing its banks, emphasizing that which is far in excess of the normal. The Lord requires genuine righteousness, real holiness that far exceeds anything human and can exist only in the redeemed heart. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 45 verse 13,

*“The King's daughter is all glorious within; her clothing is interwoven with gold”.*

When the inside is beautiful, outward beauty is appropriate; Without inner beauty, outward adornment is pretence and a sham.

God has always been concerned first of all with inner righteousness. When Samuel was ready to anoint Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, to be Saul's successor, the Lord said,

*“Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”* (1 Samuel 16:7).

God not only requires inner righteousness but perfect righteousness.

*“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48).

To qualify for God's kingdom, we must be as holy as the King Himself. That standard is so infinitely high that even the most self-righteous person would not dare claim to possess it or be able to attain it. Remember what James 2 verse 10 says, *“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.”*

That impossibility leads the sincere person to wonder how can such a holy heart be obtained, and even to ask the question which Jesus' disciples one day asked Him, *“Then who can be saved?”* (Matthew 19:25). And the only answer is the one Jesus gave on that occasion: *“With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”* (v. 26).

Thankfully!! the One who demands perfect righteousness, amazingly gives perfect righteousness. The One who tells us of the way into the kingdom is Himself that way. Jesus made this clear in John 14:6:

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me”.*

The King not only sets the standard of perfect righteousness, but will Himself bring anyone up to that standard who is willing to enter the kingdom on the King's terms.

*“A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus,... since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified”* (Galatians 2:16).

To be justified, is to be made righteous, and to be made righteous by Christ is the only way to become righteous in God's eyes. Romans 3 verses 21 and 22 teach us:

*“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe”*

Faith had always been God’s way to righteousness. This truth should have been known by the Scribes and Pharisees, the experts on the Old Testament, above all other people.

As Paul pointed this out very clearly to his Jewish readers in Rome, in Romans 4 verse 3,

*“For what does the Scripture say? ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”*

He quoted from the Book of Genesis 15:6. The first patriarch and the first Jew, was saved by faith, not by works or the act of circumcision (Romans 4v10) and in Romans 4 v11 we read that Abraham *“received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them”*

The uncircumcised includes those before as well as after Abraham. He was the father of the faithful, but he was not the first of the faithful because as we see in Hebrews 11 verses 4 and 5 clarifies this:

*“By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain though which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous” and “by faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God”*

If you go on to read verse 7 it tells us that it was also only by faith that Noah found salvation.

The righteousness God requires cannot be earned, accomplished, or even deserved by anyone, but only accepted by those who receive the gift that God gives us. Christ offered Himself for sin, in our place. Romans 8 verses 4 and 5 tell us that Christ *“condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us”*

God gave the impossible standard and then Himself provided its fulfilment. Don’t you think that God deserves praise - ‘Praise God!’

Paul the apostle had considerably more claim to man-made righteousness than most of the Scribes and Pharisees put together, but explains in Philippians 3:4-6:

*“If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more,” wrote Paul; “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless”*

When the apostle was confronted by Christ’s righteousness, he was also confronted by his own sinfulness. When he saw what God had done for him, he saw that what he had done for God was worthless. He continued on in Philippians 3:7 to 9;

*“Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith”*

For those who trust in Him, Christ has become *“to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption”* (1 Corinthians 1:30).

When God looks at the imperfect, sinful believer, He sees His perfect, sinless Son. We have become *“partakers of the divine nature”* as 2 Peter 1:4 describes and possess in ourselves the very righteous life of the holy, eternal God. Admittedly, until our flesh is also redeemed (Romans 8:23) that new righteous self is in a battle with sin. Even so, we are righteous in our standing before God in Christ, and have the new capacity to act righteously.

It is very sobering to think that if even God’s own law alone cannot make a person righteous, how much less can man-made traditions do so? Those who insist on coming to God in their own way and in their own power can never reach Him; they shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. No church, no ritual, no works, no philosophy, no system can bring a person to God. Those who, through a church, through a cult, or simply through their own personal standards, try to work their way into God’s grace know nothing of what His grace is about.

It is tragic that many people today, like the Scribes and Pharisees, will try any way to God but His way. They will pay any price, but will not accept the price He paid. They will do any work for Him, but they will not accept the finished work of His Son for them. They will accept any

gift from God except the gift of His free salvation. Such people are religious but not regenerated, and they shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

We know in everyday language what Jesus is saying, *“I am not setting God’s law aside, I will uphold God’s law, and I will strip it of all the barnacles of man-made tradition with which it has been encrusted. I will re-establish its pre-eminence, its permanence, and its pertinence. I will reaffirm the purpose God had for it from the beginning: to show that every person is a sinner and is incapable of fulfilling the law. The one who lowers the standards to a level he can fulfil will be judged by God’s law and excluded from God’s grace”*.

It is very serious and very important to have some idea as to what Jesus is setting forth here not just for the disciples then. God is not asking us to do the impossible. He has already done that for us in the Person of His Son our Saviour. We have indeed every reason not to be silent but to open our hearts and voices and give Him praise.

In verses 21 to 48 of Matthew Ch5, Jesus explains to us the purpose of the Law. Each verse that we will study, will come back to a common denominator that we have just examined, and that is - Jesus focuses on the internal, what is going on in the hearts and minds, and not the external. Just like in the days of Abel, Noah and Abraham, God requires the heart to love and obey Him. If the truth is not in the heart then it does not exist at all. Jesus was not revealing something new but relating what was in the Old Testament. People in the Old Testament knew these truths. Take for example, Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kings 8. Note what verse 39, of 1 King 8 says -

*then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men)*

David made the same kind of remark to Solomon in 1 Chronicles 28:9: *“As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will cast you off forever.*

And note also the words in proverbs 16:2 : *All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, But the Lord weighs the spirits.*

What Jesus is teaching here in this chapter, and what we read of in the New Testament can also be found in the Old. These were not new truths.

Jesus said to the church of Thyatira in Revelation 2:23, that He is the one who searches the mind and the heart. Right external behaviour only pleases Him when it corresponds to the right internal attitudes and motives. Jesus in these verses knew that His hearers, in particular the self-righteous and self-satisfied, could not understand His words but He challenges them in much of His sermon by exposing their faulty principles and motivations of the religious system they created and had ultimately replaced God's own revealed Word.

Before I finish, let's just take one more example. Remember the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18v18 to 23? He asked Jesus *"Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus answer by saying 'no-one is good except God' but he went on to say ' Keep the commandment' And the Rich Young Ruler said to Jesus 'Well, I have done that since my youth' Now let's just read verses 22 and 23 of Luke 18 -

*"So when Jesus heard these things, He said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich."*

We can see here that this Young Ruler may have kept the commandments external, but he loved his wealth more, and regardless of his actions, here his heart is exposed. We all know that it is very easy for us to look at the Scribes and Pharisees, and see exactly what Jesus was talking about. I'm sure we can even look at the rich young ruler and see just how wrong he went but let us not overlook how this applies to us.

We have a lot to consider, in relation to our own standing before God. As believers in Christ we have been made righteous before God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ. The fact that we have been made righteous, *are we living out the good of that, in our lives?* In other words, are we living in peace with God and others around us as best we can, are we living joyfully

regardless of what life is throwing at us? Are we thankful before God when we consider all He has done, are we continually praising God as we should be?

One thing that we need to be very careful of also, is to not act holier than thou, because we are saved! Unfortunately some believers can have a religious spirit, because they have left their first love or have become unteachable, thinking that because they know the truth, they think we are living it., they have made it somehow, and that they don't need to be refined or changed. We are in danger of hearing challenges in the word, or even in a sermon, but think in our hearts of hearts that it's for someone else and you probably have that person in mind. Sadly, often believers can act like Pharisees, by doing and saying the right thing, while growing cold inside to the things of God, hoping what we have done in the past will cover us in other people's eyes, or that going through the motions will somehow be o.k..

The times in which we live are getting darker, and more difficult for believers to just be part of society. There are so many policies that are being made that are clearly contrary to the Word of God and the Law of God. The world doesn't need any more fake Christians, Pharisees or Scribes, it doesn't need any more luke-warm friendly Christians, but it needs Christ centered, spirit filled, Bible believing Christians, those who are the real deal, who can point them closer to the Saviour, their rescuer. Just think about it you have been made right with God, you are a child of God that is something worth shouting about. Praise God.

**Amen.**