

Illustrations of True Righteousness

Many theologians and ministers teach the Sermon on the Mount as a way of salvation and a rule of Christian life. I believe Jesus intended just the opposite. Jesus entered a culture of legalism in first century Judea, and a religion that based salvation on keeping the Mosaic law found in the first five books of the Bible. From all the descriptions of the hypocrisy of the religious leaders represented by the Pharisees, it was obvious they were doing a poor job of actually keeping the law. Nevertheless the religious leaders held themselves up as righteous keepers of the law—this becomes self evident by examining the parable Jesus told in Luke 18:9-14 called “The Pharisee and the Tax-gatherer”. Pharisees were supposed to be the premier interpreters, defenders, and keepers of the Law so this is a marked contrast between them and known sinners like a tax-collector.

In the parable, the Pharisee trusts in himself for righteousness, meaning he is self righteous, or he depends on his own good works and obedience to the law for his salvation. The Pharisee stood “praying to himself” which tells you something about his self confidence. He said, “God, I thank you I’m not like these other sinners in here, but I am religious and fast and tithed.” In comparison, a nearby tax collector was confessing his sin and asking forgiveness and begging humbly for mercy. Jesus then gave the verdict that the tax collector was justified before God, and the Pharisee stood condemned.

Unlock the Mystery of the Sermon on the Mount

Christians have always had mixed emotions about this beautiful sermon of Jesus found in Matthew 5 that He preached at the very beginning of His ministry. On the one hand it is beautiful and inspiring, but on the other hand it seems impossible to keep. Think about it. Do you even know anybody that is humble, mourns over their sins, is pure in heart, enjoys being persecuted, insulted, and slandered? Do they have only pure thoughts, never get angry, never have sexual desires, perfectly reconciled to all people, never lie, never want revenge, and love their enemies? If that is not difficult enough, He ends Matthew 5 with a command that tops it off, “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt.5:48). Frankly, the only person that ever lived this way or kept these commands is Jesus Christ. I believe that is exactly Jesus’ point—these proud religious leaders were teaching the people a system of self-righteousness that only works in a relative manner. By this I mean they were righteous only in comparison to other people. Is this the way God judges, on the curve? Of course not, the meaning of verse 48 is that God’s standard of righteousness, and thus the standard for entrance into the “kingdom of heaven” is the holiness and righteousness of God Himself.

The KEY to unlock the mystery of the Sermon on the Mount is Matt.5:20, “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven”. Jesus was saying these paragons of righteousness in their religion did not measure up. They were not the model or the standard. If you were in that audience, your question would have been, “Then who is? They are the best we have got”.

Six Illustrations of the Pharisees’ Failures

Jesus now began to prove His point by listing six practical illustrations of how the teachers of the Law were failing to keep the Law. Notice the repetition of a phrase before each illustration—“You have heard”, meaning you have been taught. This is followed by, “But I say to you”, which means the correct interpretation of the Law is given here by Jesus. When Jesus said “You have heard...but I say unto you”, He is revealing how the Pharisees have misinterpreted the Law to suit themselves and how they have fallen way short of God’s standard.

From the Ten Commandments Jesus re-interprets murder, adultery, and lying. Then from other important laws, Jesus covers divorce, vengeance, and loving your neighbor. What we find is that mankind takes these laws of God and reduces them down to our level, alters them to even help them lie and deceive with tricky oaths or to take severe revenge into your own hands.

Amazingly, we find that God expects not only for us to refrain from the outward act of murder, but also not to hate people. God judges us also on what is inside of us. Remember why God chose David in 1 Samuel 16:7, “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” This applies also to adultery in Matt.5:27. God’s standard includes your desires as well as the actions. In the first century they had taken a command of Moses meant to protect women and used it to get a quick easy divorce. In Deut.24, Moses wrote that to divorce you must give a woman a legal certificate freeing her from any obligation so that she could remarry, but it was never his intention to promote divorce. From the beginning it was not God’s will, but Moses was saying if you do it anyway against God’s will, you must free her legally. The Pharisees used that passage to allow quick and easy multiple divorces for no reason at all.

As part of their commitment to the Lord, Moses had told them to make certain vows, but they had manipulated that into a complicated system of oaths that actually enabled them to lie and deceive. Jesus listed some of the multiple things they could swear by in their fake traditions to try and gain credibility in Matt.5:34-37. It was like a giant game of King’s X which caused a credibility gap---the very opposite of God’s intention. Then Jesus quotes from Ex.21:24, “An eye for an eye” which was actually a law given to prevent personal revenge. Crimes were to have punishment that fit the crime only, with

the intent to prevent feuds from escalating into violence. They had taken this law also and manipulated it so they could take revenge. Who can forget the evil Lamech, the descendant of Cain in Genesis 4:23, who said, "I have killed a man for wounding me, and a boy for striking me, if Cain is revenged sevenfold then Lamech seventy-seven fold."

Shattering the Illusion of Self-Righteousness

Looking back at the entirety of Matt.5 we can see that Jesus began His great sermon by expressing the attitudes and actions of those who will be in the Kingdom. God expects nothing less than this type of humble submission and acknowledgment of our spiritual poverty, mourning over sin, and seeking after a righteousness that can only come from Him. Citizens of the kingdom recognize the mercy and grace of God that has been bestowed on them, so they in turn are merciful and forgiving to others. In being so, they will be "lights" in a dark world and "salt" in a tasteless society, and they will receive the blessing of God.

Yet, what was the reality of first century Judaism? They had taken the perfect holy standard of God's law and made a religion out of it. They saw it as a way to approach God according to their own self-righteous efforts. Jesus would condemn this self-righteousness in Matt.5:20, and then prove through a series of contrasts how far short they came to the true righteousness of God. Jesus' concluding remark in Matt.5:48 put the finishing touch on the vanity of the pursuit of self-righteousness by "religious people". Since we are held to the godly standard of perfection, then our only choice is to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" that only God can provide. God, in His love and mercy has provided that righteousness in the atoning work of Christ on the cross. By partaking in Christ, we receive God's blessing of His righteousness. Paul said it well in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made Jesus who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him".

Conclusion

The question remains for us, will we choose to pursue this righteousness on our own terms as the Pharisees did? Is it all about me and what I achieve, or will I humbly approach God acknowledging my spiritual poverty, praising Him for His mercy, and seeking after His righteousness through an abiding relationship with Christ? Will we allow Him to change us from the INSIDE out, or will we continue along with the rest of humanity to perform on only an external basis?

PSALM 32, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit."

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