

The Righteousness God Requires

In our New Testament reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us about the righteousness that God requires, which enables us to please God and gain his blessings. Follow as I read **Matthew 5:17-20**:

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

In the early 16th Century, a monk named Martin Luther launched the Great Reformation, which we and many reformed churches are celebrating today. His key doctrine, from which the Roman Church had strayed, was “sola fide,” faith alone. He dared to teach that anyone could be made right with God simply through faith in Jesus Christ.

Being made right with God, i.e. righteousness, as Jesus upholds in our text, is one of the key words of the Bible. Righteousness describes the character of our holy and loving God. It also includes his actions of agape, unmerited love and kindness through the Christ of the cross. Human righteousness, properly understood, is what God demands and desires for us. A righteous life, simply understood, is one that reflects and pleases and honors God.

Righteousness and a righteous life isn't just a personally holy, happy and fulfilling life. It's a life of selfless and sacrificial service done with unconditional love. Righteousness includes active participation with God in his work of setting a fallen and broken world to rights. It's God's high standard for life and for society. If righteousness held sway, this world would be a lot better place for all of us. But this kind of radical righteousness must be properly understood and, as Jesus says in our text, must be an abundant and surpassing kind of righteousness.

Some unbelievers, who reject the message of Jesus and the need for a personal relationship with him, say they accept the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. They acknowledge Jesus as a good man and a teacher of a better way of life and a life of peace. But it's irrational to accept Jesus as a good man, and then select from his teachings what's agreeable to us. Jesus is either who he is and all that he says he is or he is, in the oft-quoted words of CS Lewis, either a liar, a lunatic or a mere legend. In our Scripture reading, Jesus sets forth himself as the authority over righteousness and the one who demands righteousness from his followers.

Jesus defines righteousness. He said he had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but rather to fulfill them (17). Jesus was not bound by the

legalistic rules of Jewish tradition, which listed 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions. What did Jesus mean by not abolishing but rather fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, the Old Testament Scriptures? This is a key statement to guide us in our understanding and interpretation of the Old Testament.

Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets that prophesied his birth, his cross and his resurrection. The apostles and evangelists preached the Old Testament, their Scriptures, with this messianic understanding and application (Acts 2:14ff; 7:1ff; 8:26ff; 13:13ff, etc.). Jesus thus said that he came to fulfill the Scriptures, and throughout his earthly mission he noted that his words and works fulfilled the Scripture's promises (e.g. Luke 4:21; 18:31; 24:44).

Jesus perfectly obeyed the Moral Law of the Scriptures, being tempted in every way we are, yet was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). It was because of his sinlessness that he could be the perfect sacrifice for our sins, the just one dying for the unjust (Romans 3:21ff; Hebrews 9:11f). Jesus is the theme of both the Old and the New Testaments. Paul notes that his fellow Jews missed the point of the Hebrew Scriptures—the righteousness from God revealed in and received by faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:4). Paul makes this point abundantly clear as he shares his testimony of faith, saying that although he was a “Hebrew of Hebrews” and “in regard to the law, a Pharisee,” he counted all of these advantages as mere rubbish compared to knowing Christ, to whom all of these things merely pointed (Philippians 3:1-11).

A painter, such as our daughter, begins her paintings with a sketch, a pencil drawing that outlines the subject of her portrait. Then she fills in the sketched outline with colors that brings the subject to light and full comprehension. The Old Testament is the sketch of the Messiah, whereas the New Testament gives us the full painting of Jesus' character and words, all that we need for the understanding of faith. Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture, meaning that he “fills in” the Scriptures. Through our faith in him and a relationship with him, Scripture comes to full life and color for our understanding.

As a church in the Reformation tradition, we hold to the conviction that Scripture, and not the traditions of the church and its councils, is the source of our faith and hence of the true righteousness that Jesus says is essential for entering the kingdom. And we Protestants also need to be aware that we have our own traditions that sometimes turn us into legalists, and that potentially supersede the true meaning and intent of Scripture.

Jesus fulfills the righteous demands of the law of God but also **he demands righteousness**. He says we cannot break even the smallest commandment, and that we must have a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law (19f). Jesus says that not only has he fulfilled and perfectly obeyed the Law and Word of God, but that if anyone expects to enter the kingdom of heaven, he or she must also (19f). Literally, Jesus says he expects not just some righteous behavior but perfect sinlessness.

These scribes were the teachers, the experts in the Hebrew Scriptures but also in the oral tradition with its 613 or so laws and prohibitions, which later

comprised the 800-page Mishnah. And the Pharisees were those who claimed to keep these laws, which they sought to do with all diligence. And Jesus says that the requirement for entrance into heaven is a greater righteousness than that possessed by these “seminary professors of theology.”

Jesus says that we must obey the Moral Law, not just in our outwardly conforming, minimalist behavior, but also in their broader, spiritual application. God demands not just our outward conformity and restraint from crimes and other forms of immorality, but also he demands pure thoughts, motives and even unconditional love toward our enemies. Righteousness is not just refraining from certain actions (e.g. the “sins” that we catalogued by Baptist preachers in my past), but is also the righteous response we should make to injustice, suffering and need, when we have the opportunity to make a difference in people’s lives and in the world.

As Paul related his testimony of his legalistic, self-righteous, pre-conversion life, he realized that, though he had done a good job obeying the commandments involving outward behavior, he failed the test about coveting, perhaps even as he coveting another’s superior righteousness (Romans 7:7)! Paul realized that all of his legalistic, pre-Christ achievements and religious credentials were rubbish in comparison with the life he found in Christ (Philippians 3:7f).

Just like Martin Luther and John Wesley in later centuries, Paul found himself in despair, under the condemnation of and slain by the law of God and without excuse before him. Jesus promised that he would send the Helper, who would “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:7f, English Standard Version). The Holy Spirit convicts us of the abundant righteousness of Jesus and how far short we fall of his glory (Romans 3:23).

Jesus sets forth the law and the Word as a school teacher to confront us and say to us that we’re not prepared for the final exam. We fall far short of having this surpassing righteousness. But the good news is **Jesus delivers righteousness**.

The Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel understood that there was only one way that Israel would ever be able to keep God’s Law and have a righteousness that God would approve. Generation after generation had failed miserably to keep God’s Law. What was needed as a new mind, where God would write his Law (Jeremiah 31:33) and even a new heart, a heart of flesh in place of the one of stone, to obey his commands (Ezekiel 36:27).

And this is the message of the Sermon on the Mount. God blesses with eternal life and joy those who come to him with a poor, grieving and submissive heart that he will bless, with a heart hungering and thirsting for righteousness, which he will satisfy (3-6). God never requires what he does not enable. He never asks what he does not deliver. So, when Jesus said we must have an abundant, surpassing righteousness it is by God’s gracious provision.

The righteousness that we need is what Paul describes as justification, which is a legal term. Because God is a moral God and requires holiness and perfect uprightness from his people, he must punish sin to be consistent with his justice. And Paul explains in Romans 3, that this is what God has done through his Son, Jesus. By the sacrifice of his sinless Son, Jesus, who bore the punishment we deserve for our sins, God is both “just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:26).

Paul then reasons in Chapter 4 that we, like Abraham are justified, made right with God, by faith alone. Nothing we do or could ever become on our own would satisfy God’s demands for our being justified in his eyes. God alone can credit to us the righteousness that we desperately need. So, it is by grace that we have been saved by faith alone, and not by our works (Ephesians 2:8f). To become acceptable before a holy, just and righteous God we need an advocate in our behalf, and John says that’s exactly what Jesus is for us. He can speak to the Father in our behalf because he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 2:1f). When we realize our guilt and repent of our sin, we receive God’s gift of righteousness. Now the Father regards us as holy in his sight, as though we had never sinned. We have received the atonement through Jesus’ sacrifice of suffering and death. Now we have “at-one-ment” with God through faith in Jesus. We are by grace through faith now “in Christ.”

During her school years, Nancy lived with her family in a small Indiana (USA) town, and their house was close to county fairgrounds, the setting for a big fair that featured agriculture and a lot of amusement opportunities, such as carnival rides and contests. One late summer evening, probably during the period when we were dating during our college years, Nancy, her parents and younger sister, Jennifer, with her high school, teenage boyfriend, walked from their house to enjoy some of the fair festivities.

They were confronted by a zealous evangelist from a local church, whose members were distributing gospel literature and were seeking to present the message of Jesus to any fair-goers who would listen. When asked about their relationship with Christ and whether or not they were prepared to face God’s judgment, Nancy’s mother, in characteristic fashion, gave a glowing statement of faith and solid testimony of her assurance of salvation and preparedness to meet God. My then future father-in-law affirmed to the evangelist his similar faith, as did Nancy and her younger sister, Jennifer. When the querying and intimidating evangelist turned to Jennifer’s young boyfriend, who didn’t have the same evangelical moorings and whose faith was probably suspect, he replied, pointing to Nancy’s family, “I’m with them!”

But in fact, that’s the best answer we can give. We are with him, with Jesus Christ. We, like the young fair-going boyfriend, have no righteousness of our own. Our relationship with Jesus, our crucified, risen Savior, is our hope for entrance into the Kingdom of God. The fact that we are with Jesus is our only claim to righteousness.

But we cannot separate this judicial, imputed righteousness without an attendant imparted righteousness. The grace that saves us from guilt is the

same grace that transforms us and makes us holy, not only judicially, but also experientially. We receive righteousness as God's free gift and are justified in his sight. I am justified, "just-as if I'd" never sinned. But also I have a new nature that makes me desire to please God by becoming in fact more like Jesus each day. In his little letter, the Apostle James makes it very clear that unless our faith makes a difference in the way we live, it's not a truly saving faith. "Faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:14-26). John also argues that one of the tests of genuine faith is the fact that we live differently and we love one another earnestly (1 John 1:3ff; 3:11ff; 4:7ff).

What Jesus requires is a righteousness that comes only through the cross of Christ. Why would Jesus have suffered the cross if we could have achieved righteousness on our own? Saving grace is free but not cheap. And when received freely by grace, this righteousness costs us a life of discipleship, as we too walk in the way of the cross, the way of self-denial and suffering for righteousness' sake.