

The Right Righteousness

“For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” – Matthew 5:20

The great Scottish preacher Thomas Boston in one of his classic writings once commented, “The hopes of heaven which most men have are built on such sandy foundations as can never abide the trial. Having no ground whatever but in their own deluded fancy, such hopes will leave those who entertain them miserably disappointed at last.” That statement lays an appropriate foundation for this study. With all the “religions” in the world, they all fall into one of two categories: that of a salvation based on human achievement or Divine accomplishment.

“Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” This statement must have had a startling effect upon the hearers. The scribes were the distinguished and acclaimed teachers of the Law; notable expounders of the Scriptures. However, they failed to understand what they studied and taught. Although they were continually immersed in their study of the Law, their exposure to the Scriptures only had superficial results; they missed the intent entirely. The Pharisees were considered the pinnacle of spirituality, a level of piety unattainable by the common man. They developed a standard of morality and ceremony beyond what the masses could begin to keep: “And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.” (Mat. 23:4) They went far beyond anything demanded in the Old Testament Scriptures and developed a code of ethics based on tradition and ceremony: “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’ Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” He was also saying to them, “You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.” (Mk. 7:6-9)

The system of the scribes and Pharisees was purely based on external, outward observances of the Law. To this Jesus pronounces eight ‘woes’ or curses, denouncing their hypocrisy in Matthew 23: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.” (Mat. 23:27) Jesus was saying that true righteousness must exceed the outward formalism; the ceremonial rules and tradition of Pharisaical religion, and must be based on true heart obedience to God’s standard. The Pharisees were more concerned about actions rather than motives; detail than principles; doing rather than being. The remainder of the Sermon on the Mount is essentially an exposition of Matthew 5:20; it was not just outward actions, but inward desires: “For as (a man) thinks in his heart, so is he.” (Prov. 23:7) It was not simply adultery, but a lustful look; not just murder, but hate in one’s heart toward another. This was a principle that even the scribes and Pharisees should have observed from the Old Testament: “Behold, Thou desirest truth in the inward parts.” (Ps. 51:6) Charles Spurgeon has a practical comment regarding this verse: “I would not for a moment say anything to retard Christian unity, but there is something before unity, and that is, ‘truth in the inward parts’ and honesty before God. I dare not be a member of a church whose teaching I know to be false in vital points. I would sooner go to heaven alone than compromise my conscience for the sake of company.”

Jesus stated the standard ultimately at the very outset of the Sermon on the Mount in the Beatitudes by saying “My kingdom is on the inside”. He pronounced judgment upon the Pharisees’ outward pretense of righteousness. He condemns the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and its resulting effect on those they taught: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.” (Mat. 23:13) Furthermore, Jesus calls the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees ‘an abomination’: “And He said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knows your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.” (Lu. 16:15) God’s standard of righteousness has always been “truth in the inward parts.”

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was solely external, consisting of outward observances of the Law. They were strict in abstention from gross sins such as adultery, theft, murder and idolatry; but impure thoughts, covetousness, hatred and coldness of heart toward God did not register in their conscience. Their righteousness was partial: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the

weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” (Mat. 23:23) Their righteousness was self-centered: “But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi.” (Mat. 23:5-7) This false standard is the natural persuasion that attracts men the world over; a religion of external performances, deluding many into a false assurance of eternal happiness.

What is the true standard of righteousness and how is it obtained? “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” (Mat. 5:48) Because that is a standard no one can attain, we are faced with an apparent impossibility. However, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” (Mat. 19:26) That is the answer - “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 2:16) He who demands perfect righteousness gives perfect righteousness.

Finally, hear the words of the Apostle Paul that provide an excellent summary on the delusion of a man-made righteousness: “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: 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.” (Philip. 3:4-6) BUT! “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.” (Philip. 3:8-9) Let us bind our hearts together with the hymn writer:

“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.
Naked come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace.
Foul I to the Fountain fly, Wash me Savior, or I die.
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.”