

"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.

Christ was not a user of weasel words. His language was direct, clean-cut and forthright. He did not leave any doubt whatever in the minds of His hearers that He disapproved of the type of righteousness displayed by the scribes and Pharisees.

The scribes were a body of learned men organized by Ezra at the time of the return from Babylon. Their business was to transcribe and expound the Word of God. They were properly called lawyers also.

The Pharisees originated in a time of corruption. The word "Pharisee" denotes a separatist. They separated themselves in an attempt to restore the pure worship of God. But in the time of Christ they had greatly degenerated into mere formalism and hypocrisy.

The scribes and Pharisees thought they were very righteous, yet Christ told His followers that unless their righteousness exceeded the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees they should in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. Even though the scribes and the Pharisees represented the good people of Christ's day, it is quite obvious that He did not think much of their goodness. The severest and most awful denunciations that came from the lips of Christ were thundered against the scribes and Pharisees. "Woe unto you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites." The lowest depths of His righteous indignation seemed to be stirred when they were gathered about Him. He put the brand of hypocrites upon them and held them up to the scorn and derision of His own and all coming generations.

Christ preached righteousness. He desired to set apart for Himself a righteous people. He purposed to establish a kingdom of righteousness on the earth. Righteousness has a negative and a positive side. Negatively, it means freedom from sin. Positively, it means a perfect conformity to divine law.

## I. The Righteousness Of The Pharisees.

### 1. They were orthodox.

They had an elaborate creed and were most strenuous in defending it. They held to the doctrine of a personal God. They believed in the immortality of the soul. They were sticklers for the inerrancy of the Scriptures.

We are not taught to avoid their orthodoxy, but to exceed it. But how shall we do this? By adding life to it. The insufficiency of their doctrinal righteousness lay in the fact that it was hollow at the core. It needed quickening power.

### 2. They were moral.

They were above reproach so far as the morality of the day was concerned. They had an elaborate moral code. They revered the law so much that they made a fetish of it. But this was not what Christ was talking about. He wanted His followers to show a superior kind of morality, based on a vital relationship with God.

### 3. They were prayerful.

None were more frequent in prayer than they. They prayed at home, in the temple and on the street corners.

### 4. They were self-denying.

They fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, and frequently on other days. They subjected themselves to many austerities and denied themselves many indulgences.

### 5. They were liberal.

They gave tithes of all they possessed, and they gave alms to the poor in great

profusion, accounting these acts very meritorious.

6. They were ostentatious.

They prayed and fasted and gave alms that they might be seen of men and have the praise of men. If they had been forbidden to pray where they would be seen of men, they would have ceased to pray. If they had been forbidden to sound a trumpet when they were about to give to the poor, they would not have given. If they had not been permitted to magnify themselves in their religious work, they would have ceased to be religious.

7. They were zealous.

With the conviction that they alone were right, it is said that they "compassed sea and land to make one proselyte."

8. They were self-sufficient.

They scarcely thought of depending on God, or of accepting salvation as of grace. They were proud, self-opinionated and self-sufficient.

## II. The Righteousness Of The Pharisees Was Deficient.

1. In nature.

It was not spiritual. It was only external. It consisted of outward observances of the ceremonial and traditional law. They offered sacrifices, fasted often, prayed much, were very punctilious about ablutions and tithes and the ceremonies of religion, but they neglected justice, truth, purity, and did not strive to be pure in their motives before God. They washed their hands, but not their hearts.

2. In object.

The object of their righteousness was the praise of men rather than the approbation of God.

3. In effect.

Their righteousness produced pride of spirit, hardness of heart, blindness of mind and hatred of others.

## III. Wherein Must Our Righteousness Exceed That Of The Pharisees?

1. In its origin.

It must be implanted by the Holy Spirit. It must be the result of the renewing grace of God. It must be a divine work wrought within.

2. In its nature.

It must be from the heart, springing from fervent love and sincerity of soul. It must delight to do His will. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was purely mechanical. It lacked life. It was a body without a heart; a tree without a root. They revered the letter which killeth and ignored the spirit which giveth life. Love is far more than a regard for a mere rule.

3. In its extent.

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was human, self-centered and went only the first mile of requirement, but that of the true Christian will voluntarily go the second mile into a glad, willing service that will embrace the whole of God's will, both the letter and the spirit of His commands.

4. In its object.

Their supreme object seemed to be the praise of men. They prayed to be seen of men. They gave tithes to be seen of men. They sought the attention and the

praise of men, and to a degree they had their reward. But the righteousness of the true believer is to go far beyond this mere spectacular routine. The honor of God, the purpose to glorify Him in all things, is to be the motive which actuates the sincere Christian.

5. In its fruits.

The effect of the formal righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees made them harder and more unresponsive to duty every day. It also caused others to dishonor and despise religion. Their ceremonial righteousness was wholly superficial, external and showy. They were hypocritical. The Greek word which is translated "hypocrite" means an actor or stage player. The ancient actor was a deceiver. He was not what he appeared to be. So was the Pharisee who played the role of a saint without an element of saintliness in his character.

In His marvelous witness to the truth, Christ uncovered the false pretenses of these Pharisees, exposed their every fraud, exploded their every windbag, anathematize every sham, and drew a line of demarcation between the artificial and real as distinct as the heavens and as broad as the universe. You can readily see then how inevitable were His conflicts with the Pharisees. In religion they were actors, disguised men, hypocrites, whereas He was the incarnation of truth and sincerity. While the Pharisees were so occupied with questions of religious ceremony that they forgot or ignored the practical duties of everyday life, Christ was pleading for a vital, active, masterful, eternal principle of righteousness that would purify, adorn, enrich and exalt all human life.

The righteousness of the Pharisees was selfish and self-fabricated. It was a bid for human admiration and applause. They prayed and fasted and gave alms in order that they might be seen of men and have the praise of men. In such a righteousness there is no reality. Christ came to scourge and demolish such Phariseeism. He unmasked it so completely that anybody of ordinary capacity will be able to detect it and to see the immeasurable distance between it and pure and undefiled religion. The religious activity that is not born of unselfish love and holy aspiration is a mere stage performance which God repudiates and condemns, and all true men abhor. The righteousness that Christ taught reveals a breadth, loftiness and grandeur of mind which the Pharisees never approached. It also reveals itself in a lofty moral courage which is not turned from the path of duty by fear of consequences. Moreover, it reveals itself in great sympathies and affections. It is unselfish, tender and merciful. It is more than uncompromising hostility to wrong. It is more than open war against the forces of evil. It is gentleness, patience, pity and love.

Romans 10:3 portrays the attitude and conduct of these Pharisees: "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." The inadequacy of their righteousness was demonstrated when they rejected Christ, saying, "Away with Him!" This is the touchstone and final test of righteousness. There is no true righteousness which does not hold Christ as the very heart and center of all. Christ is the sum and substance of righteousness.

Phariseeism contented itself too much with mere abstinences and negatives. They observed the negatives of religion, but they cared little for the included positives. The omission of required good actions did not trouble them much.

Christianity does not consist in abstaining from things no gentleman would think of doing, but in doing those things which would not likely occur to anyone who is not in touch with God. The religion that Christ taught was far more than a matter of simple moral decency. Conventional respectability was not enough for Him. He wanted His followers to show a superior kind of morality, based on a vital relationship with God the Father. Righteousness for Him was no negative

thing. It was a positive, dynamic, spiritual attitude toward life. He calls us to a kind of morality that is alive with power and beauty. It is goodness forgetful of self, magnified by love, purified through suffering, and glorified in dedication. Christians are to outrank in life and conduct the ordinary run of humanity. They are to manifest a distinct and unmistakable superiority. They are to be distinguished by nobler aims, nobler ideals and nobler deeds. Christians are to believe more than others. They are to be more than others. They are to rise above the average of life around them in the purity of their motives, in the fulness of their generosity, in the sweetness of their temper, and in their freedom from that which is selfish. Christians are to do more than others. What the world needs today is the touch, the thrill and the inspiration of magnificent Christian conduct. It needs the conduct that will show itself, not merely in prayer and in occasional church going and a few religious formalities, but in practical righteousness and in a mighty outreach of sympathy.

If a Christian's righteousness is genuine, it flows from a heart attuned to God. It is the outflow from trust in God, from love for Him, and from a real desire to do His will. It does not have any element of outward pomp and show. It is both internal and spiritual, and seeks the approval of the Lord, rather than the praise of men. It makes the heart benevolent and ardent to do good in order that God may be glorified.

How great is the folly of trusting to self-righteousness! It excludes from the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of glory. How great is the happiness of those whose righteousness exceeds, is of the nature that God can and does approve!

True Christians are not satisfied with merely meeting the average requirements of the society in which they live. They demand the best of themselves. This is no easy matter. It requires a stern self-discipline which most of us do not like. Most of us are second-rate Christians because we have been satisfied with second-rate living. We want to be good and bad at the same time. There are too many middle-of-the-road Christians who have never dared to live gloriously. The Christian, who honors the Lord, makes bonfires of all that stands in the way of his growth in godlikeness. He throws out the evil and burns up the cheap and undesirable. The superior life is not a matter of following rules, but of following the Lord Jesus. We like to think of ourselves as members of the kingdom of God, but we do not deliver when it comes to making our Christian influence felt where we live. We believe in justice, morality and brotherhood in the abstract, but we do not recognize their claim upon us in our own block.

The Christian life demands a superior humility. Christ was suspicious of the righteousness of the Pharisees because they boasted how good they were. They prided themselves on obeying all the rules and regulations. They did not admit that they had any faults. Their pride in their goodness diluted its value. Boasted vanity is always foreign to Christian righteousness.

Along with their high regard for themselves, the Pharisees took great delight in sitting in judgment on others. They not only held themselves up as models of behavior, but they felt free to criticize those who broke the rules. Far too many professed Christians today have the same idea and attitude. They like to judge, but do not want to be judged. They are harsh in their attitudes toward others. The strongest rebukes of the Master were directed toward those who were harshly critical of others. He told His followers to leave the judgment of man to God.

Our Lord would have each of us who know Him in the forgiveness of our sins to far surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees not in mere outward zeal for the law, but of inward conformity to it; not in servile fear, but in filial confidence;

not in religious pride, but in devout humility. True righteousness is internal, spiritual and yet manifest in life. It makes the heart humble, benevolent and ardent to do good. Only right relationship to God can put into us the stamina that can make us superior in the quality and power of our lives. This relationship will make us love others rather than ourselves, and will produce in and through us the highest possible measure of service for the glory of God and the welfare of the human race.