

5th S. after Epiphany 2/9/20
Matthew 5:13-20 C

UNLESS YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS EXCEEDS THAT OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES, YOU WILL NEVER ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

So, how many of you want to enter the kingdom of heaven? I'm guessing that by the very fact that you are here this morning, you would like to enter the kingdom of heaven. You want to enter the kingdom of heaven because that is where Jesus is and you want to be with Jesus and rub elbows with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. And you really want to enter the kingdom of heaven so that you do not burn in hell, "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mk 9)."

So you better listen to Jesus say to you, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." So, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, you have to be better than the scribes and the Pharisees.

The scribes are the guys that read the Old Testament, copied it, and taught it. In fact, they were so diligently in copying it – and remember they did it by **hand** -- they believed that if they changed so much as one iota, that is, one small punctuation mark, it would mean that God would destroy the world. And even more than that, they had all the Old Testament memorized – every verse of every chapter of every book

What did Jesus say to you? "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes." They had only the Old Testament, but if your righteousness is to exceed that of a scribe, you have to memorize every verse of every chapter of all the 66 books of the Bible. So, how's that going for ya?

And, the Pharisees. They were laymen who had jobs. But, being laymen didn't stop them from pursuing righteousness. They separated themselves from the unclean people; they would not hang out with undesirables, lest they themselves somehow become unclean. They fasted twice a week. They were very particular in their prayer life, knowing exactly how, and when, and where to pray. They were diligent in their ritual washings. They would carefully wash when they came home from the marketplace. They would scrub their pots and pans before they cooked and ate. They would even wash their furniture. No, this was not done in the interest of being sanitary, so they didn't get the coronavirus. This was because they feared that somehow, they may have merely brushed up against an unclean thing and they did not want to be unclean. Pharisees would always honor their parents, never commit adultery, steal, cheat, lie, or gossip.

So, how are you doing with that? Surely your righteousness exceeds that, right? You wouldn't dream of hanging out with undesirable people, would you? You would never have sexual relations outside of marriage, steal, cheat, lie, or gossip, would you?

And, you are very particular about how you pray and when you pray, and especially where you pray. You fast often, at least two days per week. And, when you do, you make a big deal out of it so that everyone knows you are fasting. Most certainly, you would never, ever, miss a Sunday morning worship service, even if it meant you were so sick you had to drag yourself off your death bed, you would never miss church.

You would do all that because you want to inherit the kingdom of heaven and to do that, your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Which means, you're toast. In fact, we're all toast. And the reason why is that even if you memorize every word of every verse of every chapter of every book of the Bible, even in Hebrew and Greek; it's not going to make you more righteous than a scribe.

And, even if you're very, very careful about your prayer life, about fasting, never miss church, don't laugh at mocking jokes against marriage, never cheat, lie, gossip, or covet, it's not going to make you more righteous than a Pharisee.

What to know the reason why? Because what you do or what you do **not** do does not make you a righteous person. That is what Isaiah is teaching us in our Old Testament lesson (Is 58:3-9a). In our Gospel lesson this morning Jesus is teaching us very clearly that we are not saved by our good works, and that our works, what we do and what we do not do, contribute absolutely nothing to our salvation. The Bible says it this way, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight (Ro 3:20)."

Jesus makes you a righteous person and to understand how He does it, we go back to His baptism. Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized and John tries to prevent Him from being baptized. Remember that Jesus said? "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness (Mt 3:15)."

That's what Jesus did for you – He fulfilled all righteousness by doing for you all that you **cannot** do and **will** not do. He not only knows the Scriptures perfectly; He keeps them perfectly. He fears, loves, and trusts in God alone. He loves His neighbor and He does it perfectly. He calls upon God in every trouble, even as He is dying on the cross. He never doubts any of God's Word. He does not dishonor marriage in any way. He does

not cheat, steal, lie, gossip, or covet. Jesus does all these things and He does them perfectly for you.

And if that were not enough, Jesus paid the penalty for all the times when you were not righteous. He took upon Himself all the times you doubted God's Word, all the times you laughed at jokes that mocked marriage, all the times you cheated, you lied, you gossiped, you coveted, all your sins and was nailed to the cross and nailed gave up His Spirit into death for them.

God makes you righteous by giving you the righteousness of Jesus to you to be your very own. And, he does it in Baptism. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ," is how St. Paul says it (Ga 3). In that blessed washing of new birth, Jesus clothes you with His righteousness, so that it covers over all of your sins of thought, word, and deed, and you are righteous in God's sight.

That means that when you open your Bible, and you do not even know if Jude is in the Old or New Testament because you thought it was a Beatles song, it is a righteous deed in Jesus.

When you shut your eyes in prayer, and you close them really tight to pray really hard ... and you get distracted by all those little stars flying around inside your head, it is a righteous deed in Jesus.

When come home from a long day at work and your rib, your helpmate, has made a delicious dinner of broccoli and tofu; when you start your day by walking into the bathroom and see your better half has – once again – left his wet towel on the floor, no matter what your thoughts or words are at that exact moment in time, your love for your spouse is righteous in Jesus.

This is because your thoughts, your words, your deeds, are not about your good intentions or how committed you are to doing them, or how well you do them, it's about Jesus. Even our weak, feeble attempts are all righteous because they are all covered in the blood of Jesus.

Your righteousness is Jesus' righteousness, and guess what? That means it does exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. When you are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, when you are absolved of all your sins, when you commune with Him here at His table, you receive from Jesus His own righteousness, so that you can enter the kingdom of heaven forever and ever, without end.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.