

THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Text: St. Matthew 5:17-26

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

This morning we have these words from our LORD, JESUS CHRIST, “...*unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*”

JESUS does not speak these words to frighten us; the Law of God is frightening enough on its own. The Law of God frightens us, not because God’s Law is not good, rather, it is frightening because we are, without the working of God-given faith, incapable of keeping it, of honoring it, of loving the Law, our God, and our neighbor. Even then, we cannot keep the Law of God perfectly. Yet, if you wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, then your righteousness *must* exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Who among us can claim a righteousness that fulfills the Law of God? Who among us believes that their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees? Remember, St. James tells us that if we transgress the Law of God at even one point, we have transgressed against the entirety of God’s commandments.

We know this as well as our LORD JESUS knows this, and that is what frightens us, for God’s Law we cannot perform. And that is why God sent His SON—to free us from our sins by accomplishing what we, on our own, can never hope to accomplish. “*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in CHRIST JESUS our LORD.*”

Still, our LORD did not become one with us so that our FATHER’s Law is of no effect. He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, not one jot or one tittle, nor did He come to loosen the Law’s requirements. He came fulfilling God’s Law in order that as a spotless sacrifice He could die in our place and thus, we, by grace through faith, could be forgiven all our sins.

You see, when JESUS tells us that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, He is not telling us that *we* must fulfill the Law, that was the mistake of the scribes and Pharisees who mistakenly believed they could do so. No, when JESUS uses the word which we here translate as “fulfill”, He is telling us that His ministry here among us is for the purpose of completing the promises of His FATHER in order that we be saved. His ministry enacts God’s plan of salvation as promised to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the prophets, and thus, reconciles our relationship to God, our FATHER, and redeems us from the wages we have earned, paying to the last penny the debt we owe with His innocent blood. To His Father’s promise of salvation, the innocent death of our Lord adds Jesus’ “*Amen.*”

Therefore, we should not fear the Law of God, nor should we ignore it, if for no other reason than it shows us our sin, stripping away our façade of self-righteousness, and showing us who we truly are and what we truly need. Through God’s Law we learn that hate is truly murder, lust is truly adultery, greed is truly covetousness, gossip is truly false witness, that disrespect for our parents and those in authority is truly hatred directed toward God no less than if we disregard the first three commandments to honor God by worshipping Him alone, venerating His Holy Name, and keeping His Sabbath. Thus, if the Law can accuse one of not being holy and pure, of not being completely perfect in his or her keeping of the Law and its requirements, then he or she is not righteous before God.

Yet, to truly understand righteousness as required by God’s Law one must understand this: God’s Law does not state what one is required to do if one is to fulfill its demands, as though fulfilling the demands of the Law can save you or make your righteousness any greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Instead, it states what one must *be* in order to stand in the presence of the Almighty God—holy. The Law of God declares what is meet, right, and salutary, what is good, what is holy.

So, if you are a sinner, and believe me, you are, and if you cannot hope to fulfill God’s Law, and you cannot; if your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, and it does not, what hope is there for you? What hope is there for any of us? *“Who then can be saved?”* Who will save us from this body of death?

“With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” There is nothing too hard or impossible for our God, even saving you and me, and unless you simply refuse to believe, there is no sin so overwhelming that it has not been overcome by the blood of CHRIST.

In CHRIST JESUS, God has done what *our* doing of the Law could not do. Again St. Paul writes: *“For the Law of the Spirit of life in CHRIST JESUS has made me free from the Law of sin and death. For what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own SON in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the SPIRIT. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the SPIRIT, the things of the SPIRIT.”*

Therefore, the one who believes in JESUS, the one who confesses with his or her mouth the LORD JESUS CHRIST and believes in his or her heart that God has raised JESUS from the dead, will be saved, for with this confession and faith one is set free from the condemnation of the Law.

This means that in spite of your sins, in spite of your inability to fulfill the demands of the Law, through faith in CHRIST and His promise to fulfill the Law in your place, you are made righteous, having been sanctified, having been made holy by the blood JESUS poured out upon the Cross to reconcile you to God, our FATHER.

This means that your righteousness exceeds all righteousness, even that of the scribes and the Pharisees. For yours is not a righteousness of your own, it is the righteousness of CHRIST. In this way, every jot and tittle of the Law that nailed JESUS to the Cross has been satisfied and fulfilled for you.

No longer, then, is there a debt to be paid. Your Brother can no longer bring a charge against you. The doors to your prison cell have been burst wide open, and thrown aside, and you are free. JESUS' Blood made peace with the FATHER, satisfying and fulfilling every demand of the Law, and paid the price you could never hope to begin to pay. The scales of justice are now in balance. CHRIST JESUS is risen and death is dead. There is no one left to accuse you. Therefore, it is finished, the Law of God is fulfilled, death is undone and Life reigns in its place.

Holiness, perfection, righteousness, these are the demands of the Law. Anything less than that will not do. The Law cannot be set aside and half-measures will not suffice. Your works and your merit, your “*doing*” of the Law just will not cut it. Your righteousness is nothing more than filthy rags. In this life you still fail, you still fall. Your spirit is willing but your flesh is weak. You strive to overcome sin and please God, but you find yourself falling on your face time after time.

However, you do not have to rely on your holiness, your perfection, your righteousness. Your righteousness, your holiness, your perfection, do not derive from your keeping or doing of the Law of God; they come from your SAVIOR who has fulfilled the Law of God for you. That means that you have received a righteousness that far exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees—that far exceeds any demands made by the Law. It is the righteousness of JESUS, the CHRIST, the SON of the living God.

Therefore, you no longer need to fear the Judge, for you have already been judged in the crucible of Good Friday and you have been declared innocent of all charges. The officer is satisfied and the fires of hell cannot harm you. Every last penny has been paid, and you have been redeemed by CHRIST JESUS, reconciled to His FATHER and ours, through faith spoken into you by the HOLY SPIRIT.

So, return to God's altar and receive the gift He bestows without price, a gift vastly greater than any you can offer. Receive the forgiveness of sins in JESUS' very Body and Blood, given and shed for you, and hear JESUS speak the words that only His righteousness can bestow: *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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