

## The Entrance Requirement for Heaven

(Matthew 5:17-20)

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

Be turning in your bibles to Matthew Chapter 5 as this morning we will continue in the series of messages taken from the Sermon on the Mount. Today we will be looking at just 4 verses, but 4 verses that provide some vital information. In this passage, Christ, Himself, sets forth the requirement for eternal life and admission into heaven itself. Here He answers a question as important as any we will ever consider ó òWhat does God require for a person to enter into the kingdom of heaven?ö Now thatø a good question, itø a vital question, and todayø scripture provides the clear, unmistakable answer. Accordingly, Iøve titled this morningø message, òThe Entrance Requirement for Heaven.ö

So look with me now in Matthew 5, beginning in verse 17, where Christ continues His delivery of the Sermon on the Mount by saying:

***“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. <sup>18</sup>For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. <sup>19</sup>Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>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.”***

Well, as you can see, that last verse speaks directly to the question ó to what is required if weøre to enter into the kingdom of heaven. It makes it crystal clear that if our righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees we shall in no case (we shall not) enter into the kingdom of heaven. But also, we can infer from this verse, when considered along with the rest of scripture, that one can be assured of entering the kingdom of heaven if his or her righteousness is one that does exceed ó that meets this entrance requirement as it is to be understood in the context. Itø that simple, and this morning weøre going to examine just what this requirement of a òrighteousness that exceedsö is all about.

To better understand what Christ is saying in these verses, it is helpful to recognize that the Pharisees had accused Christ of being a law-breaker because He had spoken of coming to bring an end to the law that was given to Moses, the Old Covenant, as recorded in the Old Testament. He wasn't coming to destroy it but rather to bring it to an end by fulfilling it. The Pharisees thought that the Old Covenant law was eternal and that their salvation was conditioned on their keeping it, but Christ told them they would be condemned based on their works of the law, consistent with what Paul wrote in Romans 3:20: ***Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight...*** So the confrontation here is between the Pharisees and their self-proclaimed self-righteousness and the righteousness that exceeds that of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now when the Bible speaks of the righteousness that meets the requirement for entrance into heaven itself, then in those instances, righteousness refers to perfect satisfaction to God's law and justice. That is the requirement for entrance into heaven and that is what Christ specifically came to accomplish for His people.

Now when I say that righteousness is perfect satisfaction to God's law and justice, keep in mind that everything in the law had to be fulfilled. Now in one sense we know that He certainly fulfilled all that the Old Testament law had prefigured and prophesied. But also, He had to (1) fulfill the precepts of the law and (2) if justice was to be satisfied, where sin was found (i.e. where the law was broken), the prescribed penalty had to be extracted as well. Christ met that 2-fold requirement as a Substitute on behalf of all whom He represented by what He accomplished in both His life and His death and His obedience even unto death. He walked on this earth without sin, in complete and perfect obedience to the will of God the Father. In other words, He satisfied the precepts of the law by obeying it perfectly. Secondly, He paid the prescribed penalty of the law and sin demanding death. And His death paid the debt in full for all the sins that were laid upon Him.

Now where sin is found before God's bar of justice, there must be death. Romans 3:23 tells us ***For the wages of sin*** (what sin deserves and merits) ***is death.*** But listen, if the debt owed before an infinitely holy God's justice is to be settled (or paid up in full), the payment must also be of infinite value. That's why it took the death of a God-man and His Deity giving infinite value to the sacrifice of His humanity.

So when the Bible speaks of the righteousness that is required for entrance into heaven ó this is what it is talking about ó perfect satisfaction to God's law and justice (both perfect obedience and the payment of a penalty ó one of such value that it would satisfy the debt owed to a holy God.)

Well, obviously, we as fallen sinners, have no possibility of meeting this requirement. As sinners, everything we do is tainted by our sin and so all we can merit is death. And even the suffering of hell and eternal banishment from the presence of God is inadequate to even pay down the debt owed to the justice of an infinitely holy God. Only the precious blood of the God-man can do that. So, if Christ is the only One who meets what is required for entrance into heaven, how can it be mine? I didn't obey perfectly ó He did. And I certainly can't pay the penalty owed to a holy God. So, how can I be saved?

Well, 2 Cor. 5:21 and other scriptures supply the answer by teaching us that that God laid upon Christ, all the sins (past sins, present sins, and future sins) ó all the sins of God's elect, chosen before the foundation of the world ó to be borne away by Him at the cross of Calvary. Christ suffered and died to pay the penalty for sins that He had absolutely no part in producing. They were imputed to Him or charged to His account. Likewise, God imputes, or charges to the account of all those for whom Christ lived and died, the merit of His accomplishment ó the perfect satisfaction that He made to God's justice that was completed (every jot and tittle) at the cross of Calvary. So if what Christ did is made mine by imputation, then I possess the very righteousness I need, but it's one I had absolutely no part in producing.

This is great news to someone who has been convinced of sin ó of the impossibility that God could be reconciled to them based on anything proceeding from them. Just think ó here I am a sinner on this earth (as I will be until the day I die), yet all my sins (even those I've yet to commit) have been put away, my debt to God's justice paid in full. And based upon the imputed righteousness of God (the merit of what Christ accomplished being reckoned to my account) God looks at me and everyone else for whom Christ substituted Himself, as holy, pure, accepted, and fully qualified to enter into His very presence in heaven ó not based upon anything found in me, but based solely upon that which is found in my Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, and made mine by imputation.

Now don't think imputation is merely some symbolic thing. No, it's so real that God killed His own Son on the cross for sins that were imputed. The only hope a sinner has of possessing a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees put together is that God would mercifully impute (or charge it) to their account. Why do men naturally cling to wanting salvation to be conditioned on themselves instead of desiring to be saved God's way ó with it all being conditioned on Christ, the impeccably perfect Son of God?

Well, back to our text, look with me again now at verses 18 and 19 where Christ says, ***“For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.***

***<sup>19</sup>Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”***

Notice in verse 18 that He begins by saying “For verily.” He is essentially pronouncing an oath, putting His name behind it saying, “Now this is so ó listen up ó I'm proclaiming an important truth ó that is that this law isn't going to be destroyed but fulfilled ó one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” The word “jot” comes from the Hebrew word “jod” which is the smallest letter in the Hebrew language, the “jot” being the same as “iota” ó the smallest letter in the Greek. The “tittle” refers to one of the minute punctuation marks that you'll see alongside of a Greek word. He's saying not one iota shall be left unfulfilled of the law. Today we might say it like this ó He's going to dot every “i” and cross every “t”.

Now with respect to verse 19, I studied this extensively and found it to be truly interesting. But given our time constraints today, just recognize this: Christ came to fulfill the law, not destroy it. As Romans 10:4 tells us, ***“...Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”*** God is holy and cannot pervert or diminish His holy law and justice for any reason. The Pharisees in their teachings of righteousness by works were actually teaching men to break the law ó what they considered to be ***“...the least of these commandments...”*** Remember, anything less than perfect satisfaction falls short of the righteousness of the law that would satisfy a holy God.

So, we see here that ó for those who would teach or promote a form of works salvation (i.e. ó salvation condition in any way to any degree on the sinner) ó they would be judged by Christ and those in His realm of grace (“...*the kingdom of heaven...*”) as being the least, not the greatest. Such false teachers certainly do not reside in the kingdom of heaven.

Then in verse 20, Christ sums up the entrance requirement to heaven as we read, “*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.*” In studying this, I read where the Jews of old had a proverb that went something like this, “If but two men were to enter heaven, the one would be a scribe and the other a Pharisee.” The scribes were the teachers, the doctors of the law and the Pharisees were considered the purest practitioners of the law. They were the pinnacle of personal piety. They walked their talk. These were the “best of the best.” Now Christ here is speaking of the “righteousness” presumed to be possessed by both the scribes and the Pharisees and He says when you put them both together ó the scribes and the Pharisees ó well, if your righteousness doesn’t exceed that of both of them put together (not just measure up to it, but exceed it), you won’t get into heaven. Here, Christ was communicating a standard far beyond what any mere human being could ever hope to produce.

In our recent Bible conference we were shown how the law could be appropriately described as a series of requirements and conditions. And I like that description of the law. It is a series of requirements and conditions. So, if we seek to be justified, to be found not guilty, in a right standing before God based upon the fulfillment of any condition on our part or based upon our meeting any requirement, then we expose that we are actually seeking to be saved, to be justified before God by trying to establish our own righteousness ó i.e. ó by the works of the law ó meeting some requirement or some condition. But as Galatians 2:16 tells us, “...*by the works of the law* (by our meeting some requirement or condition) *shall no flesh be justified.*”

Well, is it possible for someone to mistakenly think they are trusting in Christ and in salvation by grace, while in reality, they unwittingly are trusting in a cleverly disguised system of works ó disguised under the name of grace? You bet ó for that’s where I was for years.

Here's what I once believed. Like many of you, I believed that Christ came, lived, and died for every person who ever lived or ever would live on this earth, without exception. Now think with me here: The bible teaches that multitudes will perish in hell while others shall be saved from God's wrath and enter heaven. So here we have 2 groups: (1) those in hell (the lost) and (2) those in heaven (the saved). Now whatever you think makes the ultimate difference in determining to which of these 2 groups you will belong is well that identifies the savior you're trusting in. That's what a savior does is saves. Well is obviously (in hindsight) if Christ lived and died on behalf of all is both those who end up in heaven as well as those who end up in hell is then something else had to make the difference. He alone didn't save anyone by my former way of thinking.

So, Jesus Christ really wasn't the savior that I was trusting in because I believed He died for all men and women who ever lived is doing no more for those who go to heaven than those who go to hell. Had someone pointed this out to me, no doubt I would have argued, "No siree, Christ is my savior," but my doctrine exposed that I really didn't trust that He alone met the requirement because I believed there would be multitudes in hell for whom He lived and died. I would have put it like this, "Well, yeah is but you've got to believe in order to receive what's He's done for you." But no matter how you look at it, something other than (or in addition to) Christ was making the difference by my way of thinking and that "something" was my savior is whether I recognized it or not. Though I certainly didn't recognize it at the time, my faith was actually my savior. I presumed that my salvation was ultimately conditioned on me is because I met the requirement by believing. Shamefully, that view reduced the very thing Christ came to this earth to accomplish to little more than a prerequisite upon which I could add my part as the crowning event because that's what made the real difference. Well, that's a condition or requirement, a work of the law and as we read, ***"...by works of the law shall no flesh be justified."***

Well, religions the world over, including the many that fall under the broad umbrella of so-called "Christianity," actually all fall into 1 of 2 categories is the religion of grace or the religion of works. That is they believe that the ultimate determining factor of their salvation is either Christ and what He alone accomplished for them, or else they believe that some other condition or requirement that they add to the mix, ultimately determines whether they are saved or lost is end up in heaven or hell.

And if you're among the multitudes who believe that salvation is conditioned on you, the sinner, in any way to any degree, here God say again, "*...by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.*"

To some, the condition or requirement is the strict observance of a day ó keeping a Sabbath as was commanded under the Law of Moses. To others it's the observance of what they call sacraments. To others it's their decision to believe or accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior, to invite Him into their lives. And believe it or not, some who even believe that the righteousness Christ established must be imputed to them, they still stubbornly cling to salvation by works in thinking their belief of that truth plays some causal role in procuring or appropriating to themselves what Christ did for them.

Listen ó if anything that is done by you, in you, or through you (the sinner) ó even if you give credit to God for it ó if you assign to it any causal role in your salvation and acceptance before God ó then it is of works and not of grace and that, too, constitutes trying to meet the entrance requirement for heaven with another righteousness that falls miserably short of the one and only one that we need ó the righteousness which Christ alone established.

You may be thinking, well Randy, if what you say is true, then what can I do to be saved? The answer to what you can do is "absolutely nothing." You see, if you could do something to save yourself, to make the difference, then you would be meeting a requirement or condition and you really wouldn't have any need for the mercy of God. That would mean salvation is actually in your hands. That's self-righteousness. Now, if you become truly convinced of sin by God the Holy Spirit, such that you too become convinced that nothing other than the imputed righteousness of God in Christ will reconcile a holy God unto you, you'll realize that you're up the creek with out a paddle apart from God showing mercy on you. You'll have nothing left to plead but mercy. Now that's what it is to be humbled before God.

Mercy in the Bible is more than just compassion. It is mercy based on God's holiness, His law and justice being satisfied. Therefore, there is no mercy without the cross of Christ, our mercy-seat as the scriptures refer to Him.

Some ask, “But don’t I have to believe?” Well, God commands men to believe and as we read in Acts 17, He commands every person to repent. Faith and repentance occur together. We turn toward something in faith and that involves turning away from what we naturally think would have recommended us unto God. See, faith (as in believing) isn’t something we do in order to be blessed of God. The Bible tells us that “...**it is a gift of God: Not of works lest any man should boast**” (Eph. 2:8b-9) ó that it is part of what Christ merited (a gift He purchased) for all for whom He died. Faith is described in the scriptures as a revealing or revelation (Rom. 1:17). So, in the new birth, God gives life so that we see something we didn’t see before ó we become convinced of it and we believe it. And the thing that we believe is that all of our salvation is conditioned on the Lord Jesus Christ, based solely upon the righteousness He established in His life and death.

So, what should you do? Well, let me close by reading from Romans 10, beginning in vs. 9 where it tells us, “**That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.**” Now many folks stop reading prior to the very next verse which tells us what we’re to believe. It goes on to say, “<sup>10</sup>**For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. <sup>11</sup>For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.**” God says if our trust is truly in Him ó in who He is and what He alone accomplished ó then we shall not be ashamed. In other words, we have God’s word that all who are given the gift of faith to believe with the heart unto righteousness shall not be disappointed.

Let there be no doubt that the entrance requirement for heaven is simply this: You must possess a “righteousness that exceeds” ó none other than the perfect righteousness that Christ established and which God makes the sinner’s own by imputation, without works ó with no condition or requirement met by you, the sinner, whatsoever. In Romans 4:6, King David is quoted as having described, “...**the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works.**” God said it ó so believe it.

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself ó the Bible.