

Matthew 5:17-20 (NKJV)

17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

20 For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now let's review where **we are** at this point.

Jesus made some very dramatic statements about how committed He was to the veracity of the Old Testament scriptures. It is impossible to miss His emphasis. That Old Testament law would be fulfilled **by Him** where it **applied to Him** and by **everything else** where it **applied to everything else**. Then he went on to tell us His view of inspiration. **Every single letter**, and even **parts of the letter**, are inspired by God.

Then He tells us that His followers will be people who **keep the law** and **teach the law** correctly. The more they keep it and teach it correctly, the **greater status** they will have in the kingdom of heaven.

That brings us to today.

As I looked at verse 19 I think there is something I missed and I would like to go back and touch on it before we go further.

19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, Look at the word "least". How are we to understand that? Is there really such a thing? Aren't **all** the commandments of equal importance? I mean something is either right or wrong isn't it? So doesn't that make it 100 percent important?

Look what Jesus said.

Matthew 22:34-40 (NKJV)

34 But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.

35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked *Him a question*, testing Him, and saying,

36 "Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?"

37 Jesus said to him, "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your*

heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

³⁸ **This is *the* first and great commandment.**

³⁹ **And *the* second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'**

⁴⁰ **On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."**

If you want the summary of the **universal moral law of God**, here it is. And all **law breaking** is a violation in some way of **these two things**.

But the important thing for us to notice this morning is that the **first** is greater than the **second**. There is a priority in the law. Some laws are greater, they have a preeminence over the other lower laws.

A long long time ago Mike taught us about hierarchicalism. Hierarchicalism is a way to resolve what to do when two laws conflict. For instance when a Jewish baby needed circumcised on the 8th day, and that day was a Sabbath, they could not circumcise the baby and keep the Sabbath. So they **had to decide** what to do. They had to choose **the highest law**. They chose the **greatest good** in that instance. And in those situations they were not guilty of breaking the lower law because they chose the higher law.

So there is a **hierarchy of laws**. And we can make decisions accordingly.

Loving God is greater than loving people. That is why we do not bend God's commands regarding **how people should behave** for the **sake of people**.

That is not loving. We love God first and accept what He says. All love for humans is determined and directed by that greater love, by the greater law. We would be breaking the higher law to accommodate the lower one. And that would not be loving, it would be evil.

OK let's move on.

²⁰ **For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees*, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.**

When you first read this, does it scare you? I am quite certain it scared the people in His audience.

There is an interesting side point here. Jesus is making a dramatic statement. And this dramatic statement was decidedly **negative**. He is saying two things at once. First the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees will decidedly **NOT** get those people into heaven. And second, you need **to do better** than that.

The point I conclude from passages like this is that there is a time and a place for **calling out** systems of thought. It is often necessary, in order to contrast **false teaching**, false teaching that includes incorrect ideas about God and life, with **correct doctrine**. And those who are the teachers in those errant

systems are the biggest targets for illustrations of **what is wrong** and what **needs to be made right**.

Much of what Christ is going to say in the rest of this chapter is a denunciation of the ministry of the Scribes and Pharisees. If we were there, and we were seeking to defend them, we would find ourselves in a bad way. Even though there were probably some exceptions to the rule, Jesus addresses His criticism to the **whole group**.

We as Christians have an enormous body of things to be thankful for and to be positive about. But sometimes negativity has to be employed to emphasize the **seriousness** or **great danger** of a thing. We certainly need a good balance. But we need to keep **that** in mind as we analyze and evaluate Christian ministry. Christ was brutal on Pharisaism.

Moving on.

Now Jesus just got done telling us how His teaching was not inconsistent with the law and the prophets.

But Jesus knew that his crowd tended to lump the **Old Testament words** and the **words of the scribes and Pharisees and their traditions** together. So Christ begins to make the distinction between **what God says** and what the so called **spiritual leaders** say and do.

Like I said, much of what Jesus is about to say after this verse is to set apart what scripture **says and intends** with how the **Scribes and Pharisees** parsed it out.

What did the people think of the Scribes and Pharisees?

The Jews had a saying, "**If only two people go to heaven, one will be a scribe and the other a Pharisee.**"

Christ's audience was not likely to say, it is about time someone came along and saw through those imposters. No. For the most part it appears that the Jews of the day figured that the **Scribes and Pharisees** must be the poster children for spirituality, for righteousness.

Compared to the **Sadducees**, the other religious leaders who were more sold out to the Roman Government and whose theology was very liberal, the **Pharisees** were the **separatists**. That is what their name means. They were the ones to take a stand on doing **exactly** what the Bible says.

And the Scribes were the ones whose whole life was made up of making **copies of scriptures** and studying **each little nuance** of the words. They were the theologians.

So if a person really wanted to know what the Bible **actually said** and **what it meant**, they would go to these guys. If they wanted to just be in the club that

gave lip service to God but was really about prestige and power, they would follow the Sadducees.

The man on the street probably would regard himself as so far inferior to a scribe or a pharisee that he would never reach that level. He wouldn't even really try.

Now think about it. Who is like that for you. For me it is the likes of the John MacArthurs or Spurgeons or John Pipers or RC Sprouls or Voddie Bauchums of our day. Imagine if you were told, unless your righteousness exceeds theirs, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. That is probably how these people felt. Their first response would be, **oh no. I don't have a chance.**

I imagine that Jesus had their full attention at this point. What in the world **can Christ say now** that will give me relief from **this anxiety** I feel? How can we have that greater righteousness? What is it that is wrong with their religious heroes?

And Christ will go on to tell them, teaching by teaching, how they got it all wrong.

What did the Pharisees teach that was **so wrong**, so bad? What were they **doing** that went against what God said? We are going to skip what is said in the Sermon on the Mount because we don't want to spoil it for the next sermons. So we will look outside the sermon on the mount.

But before we go on it would be good to ask right here, **what is our idea of true spirituality?** What is our idea of a **righteous person?** What do we think **real religion is?** Would the devotion of the Pharisees and Scribes have **impressed us?** Would we be convinced by the extreme **price they paid to do the right thing** that they were the **real deal?** Would we think that anyone **that dedicated** to doing God's will should never be challenged or reproached? How do you determine who you allow to influence you? Who do you follow, and why?

With that in mind let's look at what Jesus said about the religious leaders then.
Matt 23

²⁵ **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.**

²⁷ **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men's* bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ Even so you**

also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’

³¹“Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

Notice the focus. There are at least 5 references to **external** things, things people can see. And there is a great deal of work spent in **creating the monuments** and doing the **external acts**.

But what was it that was in their hearts? What weren't they showing or talking about? What was the real Pharisee?

Extortion

Self Indulgence

Hypocrisy

Lawlessness

They are in the bloodline of the murderers of those who spoke the truth, and they are excellent examples of their breeding. Have you ever watched a dog show? The dog that best portrays the desired traits of the breed win the “best of show”. The scribes and pharisees are the “best of show” for truth murdering.

How did the Pharisee act? How did he think?

He thought that spirituality is all based on what you ended up **doing**. If you could do something without technically breaking the law, you were good to go. The **spirit** of the law was of no concern. It was the **letter** that mattered. So they could lust after another woman, divorce their first wife and marry the second. They think they are covered by the **letter** of the law. But they forget that God sees the heart. He sees all the ugliness and evil. The internal evil is not the evil the Pharisees concerned themselves with. Theirs was a religion of being **outwardly impressive**.

How could they help not being self indulgent? Isn't it the evils of our own selfishness and self centeredness that are the cause of so many of our problems. Even when no one else knows what is going on, even when we keep up a good face, our self indulgence is always a problem. And we can always justify that I can do **different than I say** because my **spiritual effort** entitles me to **special privileges**.

They had to be hypocrites. After all, how can any of us look at our **heart of hearts** and think we are **morally superior** to anyone. Humility would drive

us to tell the truth about ourselves. But that is not the kind of ministry these guys had or wanted.

Matt 23 also says this

23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier *matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

Along with focusing on the internal, they accentuate the less important. They are experts at that **which does not deliver** the spiritual mail. They seem to have a propensity to tithe just about anything. Maybe they have to buy extra long shoe laces so they can cut a tenth off them before using them. They are ridiculous. Think of all the mental effort that it would take to be so **“spiritual”**. But there were probably people suffering all around them who they **could have** and **should have** helped. They should have been adjudicating rights and wrongs so the people had justice. There was surely much suffering as the result of sin that these guys had the **power** and **resources** and **authority** to relieve. They could have administered **mercy**. But they were too busy counting their onions. They should have been pointing people to **trust in their God** in all their circumstances. They should have been telling people **how good their God is** and how **deeply** He can be **depended upon** for help. But no. That would interfere with their counting their rosemary stalks.

They have all the wrong focus. They do not see that their lives are given so they can express love. They think their existence is to obey rules better than the next guy. And to do it in a public fashion.

Luke 18:9-14 (NKJV)

9 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a

sinner!'

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Look at verse 11. The pharisee says he is not these things.

extortioners, unjust, adulterers,

Do you remember what we just read? Jesus accused them of being **extortioners** and **unjust**. In Matt 5 Jesus is probably accusing them of being **adulterers**. They **are** all the things they think **they are not**. But they do not have the proper spiritual framework to see it. They do not understand scripture in such a way that **they are the people**, like all other people, that the law damns.

Then, and this is very important for our text, look at **whose righteousness exceeds the other's**.

The pharisee is clearly condemned. He might have **created more laws** than **God himself made** and he may keep **every one of them**. But it is all an effort to **hide himself**, to **hide his guilt**, to **hide what he really is**.

But look at this low down, traitor to his people. This guy was a traitor to his family, his God, his country. This man comes to himself. He is a **beatitude** guy. Poor in spirit, mourning, meek. He wails to God from the agony that the **truth creates** when it **collides** with our **reality**. He gets it.

And what does he say? Notice he does not say anything good about himself. He is beyond saying anything good about himself. He knows he is not **better** than **anybody**. Any of that kind of thinking completely misses the point. No he says, "**God be merciful to me a sinner.**"

Is that not what every **righteous heart** cries out every day?

"God be merciful to me a sinner."

And what happens? The righteousness of the **tax collector** was greater than the righteousness of the **Pharisee**. Because the righteousness of the tax collector was the **imputed righteousness of Christ**. He was justified. How? By faith? Why? Because of humility. Only the humble qualify for grace because only they can admit they have no merit.

Oh our hearts can only praise God at this point. Tears are appropriate. Here is the salvation of Christ. Here is the justification of the one calling out to God. We are all in the tax collectors shoes. Oh praise God.

20 For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the* righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

The word for EXCEEDS here is interesting.

I will quote **MacArthur** here.

The Greek word for Exceeds “is used of a river overflowing its banks, emphasizing that which is far in excess of the normal. The Lord requires genuine righteousness, real holiness that far exceeds anything human and that exists only in the redeemed heart. The psalmist wrote, “The King’s daughter is all glorious within; her clothing is interwoven with gold” (Ps. 45:13). When the inside is beautiful, outward beauty is appropriate; but without inner beauty, outward adornment is pretense and sham.

God has always been concerned first of all with inner righteousness.”

Now, it is important that we do not limit our understanding of how our righteousness must exceed the Pharisee’s

First and foremost it must be by **imputed** righteousness. Nothing can happen if God does not move in our hearts. We need a miracle.

This miracle moves us through the beatitude process. And it drives us to the point where, like the tax collector, **we call out to Christ by faith and desperation to save us.** And so he does. At that point we are fully justified. We put on, like a robe, the righteousness of Christ. At that point our imputed righteousness exceeds any righteousness that a Pharisee could ever muster. So that is all true and utterly necessary. But our superior righteousness does not end there.

When we are justified we are also, simultaneously **granted a new heart.** And that new heart and the Holy Spirit living in us will drive us to **godly living.** We will have **signs of life.**

So in our **justification** we will have a **superior righteousness.**

But also in our **sanctification** the **acts** of righteousness produced in our lives will also be superior to the Pharisees.

We have seen that even when the Pharisee did **the right thing**, it was always with **the wrong motive.** Even when they taught **the right thing**, they did not **carry it out.** Their **lives** were flawed because their **hearts** were evil. They were not doing business with the core of the problem.

A believer’s acts of righteousness when done as a result of faith are done for the right reason. We do the **right thing** for the **right reason** with the **right heart.** We do not care who sees what we are doing. We don’t ultimately care if anyone praises us or recognizes us for what we did. We do what we do primarily because **we want to please our Lord.** When we walk by faith, our motives are not self serving.

And along with this, we are daily dealing with the evil that cannot be seen by the rest of the world. We are wrestling in the battle between flesh and spirit. We are spotting evil **way before** it makes its way to action. We call lust, lust, envy, envy, worry, worry, pride, pride. You get my gist.

Here is a quote from our brother Jones:

A man once said that the best definition of religion was this: 'Religion is that which a man does with his own solitude.' In other words, if you want to know what you really are, you can find the answer when you are alone with your thoughts and desires and imaginations. It is what you say to yourself that matters.

This inner man was not the concern or the focus of the religion of the Pharisees. To the **religionist**, what matters is **what can be seen**. What matters is what the law could **catch you on**.

To them, pleasing God is not nearly as important as avoiding the law's punishment on your actions.

I think we can see that the Christian does not need to despair about our righteousness **exceeding** that of the Pharisee. Our far superior righteousness begins with **the miracle of God calling us to Himself**. At that moment He imputes **Christ's perfect righteousness** to us. Apart from Christ, the pharisee has a **false righteousness**, a **man's centered attempt** to impress God without realizing **such a thing is impossible**. **We start with a perfect righteousness** accounted to us by faith.

Then because of the **new life** Christ gives us, we begin battling against the flesh, against the whole world of evil in our hearts, the holdovers of the old nature. We are fighting the muscle memory of our immorality. And we have little care about what **others** see. We are more concerned about what **God** sees.

I read a story a long time ago about a politician who was part of a sting operation. He was recorded **accepting a bribe** for a huge amount of cash. He stuffed all the money into his pockets. He looked at those giving him the bribe and asked, Does it show? Can anyone see it?

That is the righteousness of the Pharisee. They aren't worried about the money in their pockets. They just want to make sure no one can see it.

Our righteousness needs to be **truth in the inmost places**. It is the battle with ourselves that **only God sees**. And we get up each day and get at it again because **we love God** and mixed in with all the other competing factors every day, we really **do want to please Him**. That is a righteousness that far exceeds that of the pharisees.