

## **Except Your Righteousness Exceed That of the Scribes and Pharisees**

**by Tony Warren**

*M*any Christians are puzzled as to what Jesus meant when He said, "*except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*" They want to know if He was declaring that we get to heaven by our works or that we have to have better works than these men had.

### **Matthew 5:20**

- "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."

The Scribes and Pharisees held a belief system wherein they thought that following the obvious and basic demands of the law would be sufficient to make them right with God. However, Christ taught that we have to be Holy, perfect and righteous in order to enter into the Kingdom of God. In His words of Matthew 5:20, Christ is declaring that we have to be better than simply attempting to keep a few sundry laws thinking that this will qualify us for God's Kingdom. Because of the immaculate Holy nature of God, entrance into His Kingdom "*requires*" true and total perfection.

### **Hebrews 13:20-21**

- "Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,
- Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

It is not our own independent works that are the reason we are accounted righteous, rather it is the shed blood of Christ that is the reason our works are perfect as "*required*" by God. No man is justified by the works of the law in the sight of God,

and this confirms that the just live by the faith of Christ ([Romans 1:17](#); [Galatians 3:11](#)).

There are many who look at Matthew 5:20 as a confirmation that there is a requirement of good works by man in order for him to be saved. In fact, this verse reveals just the opposite. Christ is denouncing the idea of a self-righteous and legalistic blamelessness, which the religious leaders taught. The comments of Matthew chapter 5 are illustrating to us that, contrary to what these Scribes and Pharisees thought, the Kingdom of Heaven couldn't be acquired by man's own righteousness. The truth is, if these Scribes and Pharisees had truly adhered to the full demands of God's law, they would inevitably have come to the knowledge that it was only by the "*work of the Savior*" that they could obtain the righteousness to receive mercy of God. Instead, in their arrogance and ignorance of true righteousness, they were driven to legalism in believing that they could find favor with God through their own zeal and enthusiasm. Thus in their disingenuous piety, they demonstrated non-belief in vainly dependence upon themselves for salvation.

#### **Romans 10:2-4**

- "For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.
- 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.
- For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth."

They were ignorant of the fact that no one could overcome sin by keeping the law, because no one can keep it perfectly. If anyone would break the "*least*" of God's commandments, he would be guilty of the whole. In other words, he who breaks even the slightest precept of God, has become guilty before the law, the penalty of which is death ([Romans 6:23](#)). To an infinitely righteous God even the slightest sin is abhorrent, so that our own so-called righteousness appears as filthy or unclean rags. So no one would be able to obtain access to the Kingdom of God by his or her own works attempting to keep the law perfectly. The required perfect righteousness can only be found in the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ. So in the Scribes and Pharisees depending upon their own righteous actions to gain the Kingdom, they demonstrated a haughty spirit that was lacking God fearing obedience. Christ's rebuke of the Scribes and Pharisees is illustrating that no one will get into the Kingdom by his own actions in attempting to keep the law.

#### **Galatians 2:16**

- "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for ***by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.***"

The Scribes and Pharisees measured their righteousness by their work in keeping the law, and yet by that measurement they would never be righteous enough to enter the

Kingdom. For unless they could refrain from even the slightest sinful idea, thought or action to keep God's law perfectly, they would never meet the requirement to enter the Kingdom by righteousness. That requires that they keep every jot and tittle, every nuance and distinction of it, without the slightest oversight or turpitude.

### **James 2:10**

- "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."

In other words, if we attempt to get to heaven by a system of never disobeying a single command of God, then we must keep the whole law perfectly, never transgressing even the least point of the law. The law is a reflection of God's perfect, Holy character so that to transgress one point, is to come under the imprecation of the whole law, the required punishment of which is death.

### **Galatians 3:10**

- "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that *continueth not in all things which are written* in the book of the law to do them."

It is thus self evident that no one can keep every single point of the law his whole life ([Matthew 5:28](#); [Romans 14:23](#); [1st Corinthians 10:31](#); [1st John 1:10](#)) never offending in any point. We can praise God that those who truly believe are not under the law, but under Grace. There are some who object to this phrase "*as if*" it means that we don't have to obey the law because we have the knowledge that we are under Grace. God forbid! Knowledge of Grace does not make Christians forsake the law. On the contrary, it was not the Apostles but the Scribes and Pharisees that were ultimately forsaking the law in favor of their traditions of legalism. The true child of God does not forsake God's laws because he is under Grace. They have the Spirit of God moving them unto obedience. Those who show no real fear of God and have a cavalier or capricious attitude toward His laws (*as the Scribes and Pharisees*) usually reveal their unbelief through their pride, neglect or legalism regarding law. By contrast, those who truly fear God have the attitude that God's law is completely authoritative, and this is usually manifested in their humility and dependence upon Grace, which results in gracious obedience. Keeping God's commandments is an evidence of true saving faith, not the reason for it. Only by being born of the righteousness of Christ can anyone be regarded as keeping the law "perfectly" whereby they can enter into the Kingdom. Only in this Grace can anyone be said to be holding to the righteousness of the law.

### **1st John 2:29**

- "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him."

This is the only righteousness that exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees. Except your righteousness shall exceed the works based righteousness of the Scribes and

Pharisees, you shall not enter the Kingdom. It is the righteousness we have by being regenerated, or born of the Spirit of Christ unto new life. The "*only*" righteousness by which mankind can enter in.

### **Colossians 1:20-22**

- "And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.
- And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled
- ***In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable*** in his sight:"

Christ is infinitely Holy and righteous so that if we are raised up in Him, we receive the Spirit of His nature and the washing of regeneration ([Titus 3:5-7](#)) that sanctifies and justifies us before God. It is in His faithfulness and His righteousness that we are accounted holy and blameless. In essence, we cannot sin because we were made perfect and clothed from head to toe in the righteousness of Christ.

### **1st John 3:9-10**

- "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and ***he cannot sin, because he is born of God.***
- In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother."

Whosoever is born of God has received a new spiritual nature from Him so that their sins are as white as snow. In other words, we are pure of stain or blemish, accounted sinless. This is the perfect righteousness required to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

### **Isaiah 1:18**

- "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

There is "no sin" left to be accounted of in the true believer. Not by the righteousness of the works of his own hands, but by Grace through the faithfulness of Christ. It is only because we are washed clean in Christ's blood that we reign before the throne of God clothed in white robes in the perfect righteousness that is "*requires*" for salvation.

### **Titus 3:5**

- "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;"

Most of the Jewish people of that day (*as indeed their religious progeny today*)

believed that they could enter the Kingdom by keeping the law of God. And in this Word in Titus, God is illustrating that no one can enter the Kingdom by that kind of righteousness because it is insufficient to the task. Only by Christ's Righteousness imputed to those regenerated would they be able to enter in. That is the righteousness that exceeds ([Matthew 5:20-22](#)) the righteousness that the Scribes and Pharisees believed in. Not a righteousness wherein you merely refrained from murder, but one where you refrained from simple anger. Not a righteousness wherein you refrained from physical adultery, but righteousness where your very thoughts are pure. In other words, a righteousness keeping the whole law, which man cannot possibly obtain without the faith of Christ.

### **Philippians 3:8-9**

- "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,
- And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:"

This whole chapter puts the Words of Christ into their proper perspective. Paul was an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee circumcised the 8th day, and yet when the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was revealed to him, he saw all that as the vanity of his own righteousness, and accounted to be as "worthless waste." He saw his righteousness as but dung because finally, by Grace of God, he had come to the wisdom and understanding that the Glory of righteousness is found not in his own works, vanity, or piousness, but in the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Jeremiah 23:6**

- "In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS."

Christ is called "*The Lord Our Righteousness*," because it is He alone that can give us justifying righteousness wherein we have the true "Peace and Safety" that a restored Israel must have. Not by worldly armies or might and power, not by earthly reigns or governments, and not by overthrow of carnal principalities. We are restored to the image of Christ by His establishing a Spiritual kingdom wherein dwelleth righteousness.

### **Romans 5:1-2**

- "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:
- By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

This is what Christ meant when He said, "*except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom*

*of heaven.*" Except our righteousness is greater than that demonstrated in man's vain attempts to gain favor with God by keeping the law superficially, you cannot enter the Kingdom. For being born from above in Christ is the only way to gain perfect, spiritual righteousness.

### **John 3:5-6**

- "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.
- That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

The rebirth that Christ spoke of was not of the flesh or carnal, but spiritual. It was a regeneration wherein perfect righteousness is obtained by God's children. Except a man be born of God in this righteousness, he shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ's call to this greater righteousness, is indeed a call to a righteousness that is a result of the Grace of God. The worldly righteousness that passes for goodness by men, is not real righteousness in God's eyes. The greater righteousness Christ exhorted the people to obtain in Matthew 5:20 is not of works, but the unmerited favor of God.

May the Lord who is rich in mercy and forgiveness, grant us wisdom and understanding unto a righteousness that is greater than that of the Scribes and Pharisees. We pray that He will work His Grace within us to move us to a reverent, Godly fear to keep His commandments. Not for gain, reward or treasures, but for love. In Christ we pray we will not look to the works of our own hands or righteousness for any favor of God.

Amen!

Peace,

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The Mountain Retreat / twarren10@aol.com

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