

Surpassing the Righteousness of the Pharisees

Text Reading: Matthew 5:2

Scripture Reading: 23:1-3

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey

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LAST WEEK I TRIED TO EXPLAIN HOW THE teachings and practice of Jesus Christ in no way contradicted the Old Testament Law. Instead of contradicting the Law, Jesus fulfilled the Law by living a perfect life and dying a perfect death, that is a death that would satisfy the penalty that must come from breaking the Law. And then Jesus fulfilled the Law by satisfying the very reason why the Law was given in the first place. It does not matter whether we are talking about ceremonial laws or judicial laws or moral laws, there were specific reasons why God had them recorded in the Old Testament scriptures. People had real practical needs, and the laws helped fulfill those needs. Jesus fulfilled all the laws by satisfying the very reasons the laws were given.

The reason for the ceremonial laws was to teach people God's method of imparting grace. Once Jesus fulfilled the purpose of the ceremonial laws, there was and still is no longer a need to observe them. The reason the judicial laws were given was to demonstrate God's mercy and justice to the nations surrounding Israel. Jesus fulfilled the judicial laws by creating the Church to replace the nation of Israel to represent God's mercy and justice to all nations of the earth. Once He had done that, there was and still is no longer a need to observe the specific judicial laws written in the Old Testament. And the reason for the moral laws was to lead people to salvation. By providing salvation Jesus fulfilled the moral laws. When people receive salvation, Jesus gives them both the desire and the power to observe the moral laws.

This is a summary or explanation of how everything Jesus taught and did was in complete harmony with the Old Testament. Now today we will turn our attention to the teachings and practice of the scribes and Pharisees, and we will struggle to answer this question: "In what way was the teaching and

practice of the scribes and Pharisees out of harmony with the teaching and practice of the Old Testament?"

Did the scribes and Pharisees really violate the laws written in the Old Testament? The people of their day did not think so. The Jewish people who lived during the time of Christ viewed the Pharisees and the scribes to be the most holy and righteous people on the face of the earth.

The scribes were men who spent their time in teaching and explaining the law. When it came to interpreting the law of God, they were considered to be the authorities. They gave their whole life to studying the law and explaining it to others. They were professionals.

Maybe I think I know a thing or two about medicine and vitamins, but I am not a professional in that field. And when I am around a professional, I keep quiet. I let the professional do the talking.

The scribes were the professionals. They were men who made copies of the Law by hand. And they were extremely careful when they did that. Their whole life was dedicated to the Law, and everyone looked up to them for that reason.

The Pharisees were also looked upon as professionals. They were the professional observers of the Law. They were looked up to as examples of outstanding godly behavior. The very word "Pharisee" means "separatist". They separated themselves apart from the rest of the world by creating rules and regulations and ceremonies that went far beyond the requirements of the Mosaic Law. Their code of moral conduct was far more rigid than what was written in the Old Testament.

For example, in Christ's parable of the Pharisee and the publican, we find the Pharisee boasting that he fasted twice a week. But the Old Testament scriptures only required the Jewish people to fast once a

year. The Pharisees had gone far beyond the requirement of the Old Testament in commanding people to fast twice a week.

So the Pharisees would take the Old Testament laws and expand on them. And then they would work hard at observing every strict code of moral behavior that they had created. It was for this reason that they were considered to be the perfection of virtue.

During Christ's day, the average person would have looked at the Pharisees and the scribes and thought to himself, "I can never be as good as them. They are professionals. They not only explain the law in a way that I will never be able to explain, they also live out the law. They walk the talk."

But now Jesus enters the scene and says, "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now something is wrong here. Something is definitely not right. But what is it? That is what we must find out today. Let's take a look at the religion of the Pharisees and try to find the main thing that was wrong with it. Looking at it from the outside, it seemed so right; however, our Lord's strongest words of wrath were spoken out against this religion. You can find these words of wrath recorded in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew.

In Matthew 23:3 we find the condemning words of Jesus as He refers to the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus said, "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." Obviously Jesus was not condemning the moral teaching of the Pharisees and scribes; otherwise, He would not have said, "Do everything they tell you." It is not morally wrong for a group of leaders to decide to add laws on to the original laws so as to protect people from breaking the original laws. The Pharisees taught people to fast twice a week and to tithe not only a tenth of what they earned, but also a tenth of everything. Even a person's spices—mint, dill, and cummin had to be tithed. Jesus was not saying the

Pharisees were wrong by teaching people to do these things.

Jesus said they were wrong because they did not practice what they preached. Really? I do not understand. From all outward appearances, they did practice what they preached. In fact, they practiced what they preached better than anyone else. If we just look on the outside, it seems there was no problem.

But the problem was not on the outside. It was on the inside. God will never condemn a person for fasting more times than what is required by the Bible. But God will condemn a person when his heart is not right.

The hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees had more to do with a problem they had on the inside than it did with a problem they had on the outside. On the inside they lacked passion for God. What they did on the outside was not done to please God; rather, it was done to please men or to please themselves or both.

Perhaps the most frightening thing about the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees is that it was an unconscious hypocrisy. If someone would have passed out a survey and asked the question, "Are you fasting twice a week to please God or to please men, they would have answered by saying, "I am doing it to please God." But we know they were doing it to please men, because Jesus repeatedly said they were. They had a heart problem and they didn't even know that they did.

That is why this subject is so important for us to consider. It is so easy to have a heart problem and not know it. If I preach from this pulpit that God wants us to be good stewards of our money and you see that I am a good steward of my money, you will not consider me to be a hypocrite. But what you cannot see is my motivation when I place the check in the offering bag. You cannot see whether I am doing it out of a deep love for God and a desire to please Him. And the scary thing is, sometimes I fail to see it as well. Sometimes the act of giving for me becomes nothing more than a means of freeing my conscience of guilt. I hate the thought of having unpaid bills and I feel good when I pay them. But when I approach

Christian giving in that way, I am a hypocrite. I am saying that God wants us to do this or that, but I am not doing this or that because God wants me to. I am doing this or that because I want to please other people or myself.

You see, what makes a person holy has to start from the inside. The popular definition of hypocrisy is when the talk and the walk don't match. It is when a person says one thing and behaves in a way that contradicts what he has said. But the hypocrisy Jesus is talking about is different. It can happen even when the walk matches the talk. It happens when the talk and the walk don't match the heart, and that was the basic problem of the scribes and the Pharisees.

There is another way we can look at the problem of the scribes and the Pharisees. The moral law demands two things from us. One is to love God and the other is to love people. In Matthew 22:38 Jesus quoted the Old Testament by saying, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." The main way the scribes and Pharisees were out of harmony with the Old Testament was in their failure to love God. And because they failed to love God, they also failed to love their neighbors as themselves." The Old Testament, just like the New Testament, is really all about love, and the scribes and Pharisees failed to live up to the part of the law that demanded love. They kept the letter of the law but they neglected the spirit of the law.

Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." What Jesus means is this: The Pharisees and the teachers of the law had the talk and they also had the walk, but they did not have the heart. If we want to enter into the kingdom of heaven, we need all three.

How do we work to experiencing all three of these things at the same time? Since it is so easy to miss one of these three things without realizing it, how can we be sure we are not fooling ourselves into thinking we are not missing something when we really are?

I will now suggest to you two practical steps people need to take in order to experience the kind of righteousness that will surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

The first practical step is to desire moral perfection. It is hard to imagine how a modern day Christian can really desire moral perfection and, at the same time, not spend time thinking about the Ten Commandments. Unfortunately, very few of us are able to recite the Ten Commandments, let alone explain what they mean. I'm afraid that says something about our desire. Perhaps an emphasis on grace has made us think the moral law is no longer needed to be perfect. But the opposite is true. Grace should drive us back to the moral law with a greater desire to obey it. If the grace we have received does not do that, then I wonder what kind of grace it is that we have received. Certainly not the same kind of grace I read about in the Bible.

The very last words of Jesus recorded in Matthew are, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." If we don't have a burning desire to experience moral perfection, then our righteousness will not even come up to the level of the Pharisees, let alone surpass that level.

The second step to experiencing true righteousness is to be honest. It is to confess to the fact that all of us, without exception (the only exception being Christ Himself), are not perfect. This confession must be to God and to other people. This is the part that the Pharisees failed to do. And they failed to do it, because their love for God was not true. When our love for God is true, then we will find our security in Him and Him alone.

The scribes and Pharisees had placed their security in the approval of people. Without that approval, they felt very insecure, and so they pretended to be perfect when they were far from perfect. The very fact that they were not confessing their imperfection to God and to other people should have been a clear indication to them that something was wrong.

A church where people are not confessing their mistakes to each other is a church where there is a lot of pretending going on. It is a church that is sick and in need of healing. James 5:16 says, "Therefore

confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

Such confession must grow out of true sorrow; otherwise, the confession itself will be nothing more than another way to gain approval from men. We must sorry for offending the God that we love. That plus a desire for forgiveness and healing must be why we confess. We need to allow God to heal us directly, and we need to allow God to heal us through other people. This is why it is important for us to confess our sins, not only to God, but to people as well. People will not be able to help us unless they can see who we really are.

Warren Miller wrote a true account that took place during one winter in the town of Grass Valley, California, located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. One night a violent winter storm that hit that town. Fierce winds and torrential rains flooded the streets, and in some parts of the town, the power was off where trees had blown down. The pastor of a small church, Father O'Malley, was preparing for the Sunday sermon by candlelight as the winds beat against his window with violence that he had never heard before. Out of the darkness, the phone in his office rang, shattering his concentration. As he picked up the phone, a voice quickly asked, “Is this Father O'Malley?”

“Yes.”

“I'm calling from the hospital in Auburn,” said a concerned female voice. “We have a terminally ill patient who is asking us to get someone to give him his last rites. Can you come quickly?”

“I'll try my best to make it,” O'Malley answered.

The trip was only 30 miles, but it was hard going. Where the winding road crossed and recrossed the river in a series of small bridges, trees had blown down across the river's banks. But for some reason, there was always just enough room for Father O'Malley to drive his car around them.

Finally, in the near distance, he saw the lights of the small hospital. He parked behind some other cars to block as much wind as possible. Then, with his Bible tucked deep inside his overcoat pocket, O'Malley forced the car door open, stepped out and

leaned into the wind to make his way to the entrance.

Once inside, and as he was shaking the water from his coat, he heard footsteps headed his way. It was the night nurse.

“I'm so glad you could get here,” she said. “The man I called you about is slipping fast, but he is still coherent. He's been an alcoholic for years, and his liver has finally given out. He's been here for a couple of weeks this time and hasn't had one single visitor. He lives up I the woods, and no one around there knows much about him. He always pays his bill with cash and doesn't seem to want to talk much. We've been treating him off and on for the last couple of years, but this time it's as though he's reached some personal decision and has given up the fight.”

“What's your patient's name?” O'Malley asked.

“The hospital staff has just been calling him Tom,” she replied.

O'Malley walked to the room. Inside was a man with a scraggly beard who looked like he had already stepped over the threshold into death. O'Malley started the conversation by trying to be polite.

“Hello, Tom. I'm Father O'Malley. I was passing by and thought we could talk a bit before you go to sleep for the night.”

“Don't give me any of that garbage,” Tom replied. “You didn't just stop by at 3:30 in the morning. I asked that dumb night nurse to call someone to give me my last rites, because I know my deal is done and it's my turn to go. Now get on with it.”

“Patience,” said Father O'Malley, and he began to say the prayers of the last rites. After the “Amen,” Tom perked up a bit, and seemed to want to talk.

“Would you like to make a confession?” O'Malley asked him.

“Absolutely not,” Tom answered. “But I would like to just talk with you a bit, before I go.”

And so Tom and Father O'Malley talked about the Korean War, and the storm that was raging outside and the change of the seasons.

Occasionally, during the hour or so before daylight, Father O'Malley would ask

Tom again, "Are you sure you don't want to confess anything?"

After a couple of hours, and after about the fourth or fifth time that Father O'Malley asked the same question, Tom replied, "Father, when I was young, I did something that was so bad that I've never told anyone about it. It was so bad that I haven't spent a single day since without thinking about it and reliving the horror."

"Don't you think it would be good for you to tell me about it?" O'Malley asked.

"Even now, I still can't talk about what I did," Tom said. "Not even to you."

But as the first gray light of dawn crept into the room and began to form shadows, Tom sadly said, "Okay. It's too late for anyone to do anything to me now, so I guess I might as well tell you."

"I worked as a switchman on the railroad all my life, until I retired a few years ago and moved up here to the woods. Thirty-two years, two months and 11 days ago, I was working in Bakersfield on a night kind of like tonight."

Tom's face became intense as the words began to tumble out. "It happened during a bad winter storm with a lot of rain, 50-mile-an-hour winds and almost no visibility. It was two nights before Christmas and to push away the gloom, the whole yard crew drank all through the swing shift. I was drunker than the rest of them, so I volunteered to go out in the rain and wind and push the switch for the northbound 8:30 freight."

Tom's voice dropped almost to a whisper as he went on. "I guess I was more drunk than I thought I was because I pushed that switch in the wrong direction. At 45 miles an hour, that freight train slammed into a passenger car at the next crossing and killed a young man, his wife and their two daughters."

"I have had to live with my being the cause of their deaths every day since then."

There was a long moment of silence as Tom's confession of this tragedy hung in the air. After what seemed like an eternity, Father O'Malley gently put his hand on Tom's shoulder and said very quietly, "If I can forgive you, I know that God can forgive you,

because in that car were my mother, my father and my two older sisters."

You see, to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees, God does not demand perfection. But He does demand a desire to be perfect and a willingness to confess to God and to others when we are not perfect. If Tom had only known that he would not have had to wait until his dying day to be honest. The thing that made Tom so unwilling to confess for so many years was his own insecurity driven by the fear of what others would do to him if they knew. So he lived with the agony of unconfessed sin until the day of his death when he finally found healing.

From the harsh words often spoken by our Lord to the scribes and the Pharisees, we get the idea that there is nothing God hates more than pretense. It destroys relationships and prevents true fellowship. It is driven by the fear that, if people find out who we really are, they will reject us. Wherever there is a deep love for God and a desire to please Him only, pretense cannot exist. The Pharisees lacked that love, so they pretended.

But let's give the scribes and Pharisees credit for desiring perfection. Even if they desired it for the wrong reason, at least they desired it. We live in a day and age when such desire is almost non-existent. People have not come to the Law in the first place with a desire to obey it. The moral Law has not driven them to the cross. People are attracted to the gospel for other reasons. And because they have never visited the Law in the first place, they have never gone back to it with a desire to obey it perfectly. Many professing Christians do not even know the demands of the Law, and society does next to nothing to help us.

The main difference between religion practiced these days and religion practiced during the days of Christ is not in the amount of pretending that goes on. Pretense is just as common now as it was then. There is just as much of a lack of love for God now, both in and outside of the church, as there was then. The main difference has to do with the standard for holy conduct. Back then it was a very high standard. Now it is a very low standard.

If we were to really use the very high standards found in the Bible, and if our hearts were really overflowing with a deep love for God and a strong desire to please Him only, then there would be a lot more weeping and confessing and ministering and healing taking place in our midst.

May God do whatever is needed to bring us to that place. May God do what is necessary to make us into a holy people who are pleasing in His sight.