

Righteousness

By: Keith Holste

February 12, 2017. In Matthew 5:20-37, Jesus warns us that we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Pastor Keith talks about how righteousness isn't just about adding up all the right actions, but about being in right relationships -- with God, with those we love, and within the Christian community. Righteousness was a difficult concept for Martin Luther until he realized that God has already done everything so that we can be in perfect relationship. When we come to God every week, he helps us avoid temptation, to reconcile, and to make peace.

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We look at this text from Matthew as we begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We hear a gospel like today's and it sounds pretty difficult. Jesus says that unless we exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, we cannot enter the kingdom of God. That's pretty hard on its own. But then he gives examples, and none of us find ourselves very clean as we hear that long list of things that doesn't just talk about actions, but what goes on in our mind as well. The scribes and Pharisees had dedicated themselves to keeping every little bit of the law. They said that it was important that everyone keep all of them. They had 613 extra ones -- the Talmud -- that bolstered the Ten Commandments and the other things that were in the Old Testament. So they were really into keeping all these little laws about the things that you're supposed to do, and to keep the Jewish faith and to be a good Jewish person. And so all that was going on. But Jesus says that's nothing compared to what I expect from you. To be more righteous than that is a very tough assignment. And Jesus goes on and says how they weren't even keeping the law very well, because he takes into account the motives and what goes on in the mind and the heart, besides what is written. It sounds very impossible.

We know how we seem to innately kind of want to shrink the law, make it to a size that's manageable. We can shrink it to say "I won't steal," and so we don't steal. Or we say "I won't commit adultery," and we don't commit adultery. We find areas where we think we can keep it and we say, well I've done okay in these areas. Maybe that's good enough when I'm measured against the rules. But then we hear Jesus describe this process, and it's very unnerving. We wonder how we can ever be saved if all of our inner motives and our desires or temptations are condemning us -- let alone the small parts of the holy law that we break each week. How can we or anyone have a chance?

This is what drove Martin Luther nearly crazy for quite a while in his life. When he was a monk, his confessor said he was spending way too much time in the confessional booth, and way too much time up at night feeling sorry and feeling convicted by his sins. How could he ever enter heaven, he wondered. He couldn't control his thoughts. He would think of something bad, and he would go back and have to confess it. And as soon as he'd do that the thoughts would enter his mind again, and it would start all over again. He never found peace in this period. And some believe he damaged his health permanently by the stress he put himself through in this time when he could never find peace, because he just knew he was always convicted by this word of Jesus. But through his study of scripture, Luther began to see the forgiving love of God. He began to see it wasn't a matter of being perfect or of having no hope, or being perfect in heart and mind and action, and then having to be condemned forever. He began to see that God in Jesus had come to save him and everyone from this problem.

There was a way for him to have righteousness that exceeded that of the scribes and the Pharisees. There was a way to have peace with God. And it could change all those human relationships too, that Jesus was so concerned about. Jesus had said unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you are condemned.

When we look at the Old English word of "righteousness" it literally means "right-wise" or "right way" or "right relationship." Its early true meaning wasn't to center on adding up all the rights and wrongs in a person's life. It was a measure of relationship. That's what Jesus is getting at here: being in a right relationship with God. When you're in a right relationship, you don't focus on the little actions and the words and the rules, and make them the main thing. Rather, you focus on your love for God or for the other person, and their love for you. And you act in ways that are loving for them. You do that automatically. You don't go to the rule book and say, I'm supposed to be doing these things for that person. You love them. You love God. And you do the things that naturally flow from that. When we have this right relationship with God, we are one with God. And indeed then, our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, because we are in a loving relationship with our God and our thoughts and our actions are redeemed by God. We will naturally then live out what is best for the relationship. Then it's not so much that we *have* to do certain things, but we *get* to do the best things for the relationship.

But Luther figured out finally that it wasn't all up to him. It had all been done for him by God in Christ. Jesus knew what all happened with people. That's why he could name all those temptations and things that people do. He was willing to take all those things upon himself, keep them all upon himself, and die with all those things. And when he did, a righteous or right way relationship with God became possible. He died with all those things and he rose, and with that God brought forgiveness to us and gave us righteousness. That is a right way of being with God. We began to be in a good relationship with God. We began to do those things and live in those ways that God wants us to do, because God sees us now as little Christs, people wearing Christ around with us. God cares for us, and we know that we have someone in God whom we can trust and love, rather than someone we need to fear and try to placate all the time and live despairing that we will never do enough to please God. Jesus accomplished the way for us to live right-wise, in a good relationship with God.

In many ways it's like how we see marriage. That is, we love the person that we're married to, and have a good relationship with them. Because we love them, we do things for them. We live for them. We want them to flourish in life. We want them to be satisfied. We want them to have happiness. We don't go around with a rule book saying I need to do this or that to please my spouse. Because we know them and love them, we do what will build them up. Our relationship comes first, and the words and the actions follow. Jesus is saying that when it gets turned around, then the relationship's pretty much gone. When we focus on doing the right little things and not on the relationship, we're going the wrong direction. We may be doing okay on this small scale doing some of the correct things. But if we do it without the relationship things like Paul says, or like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, they're empty. They are noises without meaning. The love needs to be there. We know how we don't always keep the love in the relationship right, and we wander off. We do things wrong. We focus on the little things rather than the relationship. We start to feel that things aren't right and we know that we need to find our way back. We may need to step back and think about where we are with God, with those we thought we loved, and with those in our Christian community.

Jesus uses that example in our lesson today. Two people have forgotten the good relationship they have in Jesus. They go to make their offering at the worship service, but they don't like each other as they do make their offering. Jesus says stop, go and make peace with the other, and then come back and bring

the offering. Jesus isn't interested in money that isn't given in love. When we share and make the peace in our worship, that is what we're doing. We're making God happy by showing our love for our Lord. We're restoring our faith relationship so we can be in good relationship as we stand before the Lord. So sometimes we do need to step back and evaluate where we are in a relationship, whether with Jesus or with someone else. We need to mend that relationship to be right with that person. Then we can proceed into a right relationship with God. It doesn't work to say we love God but not to love those who are around us, especially fellow ones in Christ. There are right times to make reconciliations, to heal wounds, and to do what's necessary to make things right with others, so that we can be in a right relationship with God.

Peter Steinke is a Lutheran pastor, but also a psychologist. He's written a number of books on things that make healthy people and healthy congregations. He notes that relationships often get into trouble when they get fearful and anxious, and the people in the relationships begin to pull into themselves, become more self-centered, and less open to what's happening around them. For good health he says it's good to keep an outward focus and be engaged with the world around. And the same, he believes, is true for congregations. When congregations become self-centered and self-oriented they don't do so well. They get ingrown and tend to fight among themselves. But when congregations look outward, work together to do mission and projects outside themselves, they do things together and it builds up the spirit of oneness and enthusiasm for mission, looking outward rather than inward. The temptations are always there. There are always temptations to look inward, to focus on the small things instead of the relationships we are a part of, to think about ourselves and to ignore or harm those who are around us. We find these temptations in our relationships, especially when we aren't feeling very good about ourselves. We find these temptations in our communities of faith when we lose sight of the mission we all have as God's family, and think more about how things are with me. And we're tempted to do it as a country or even as the world, as people in countries draw back into individualism and tribalism rather than thinking of the whole world as having the potential to be a whole world wide community.

We come together here every week because we know how easily we forget and go back to our old ways. So we come here every week to be reminded that it isn't about us, but it's about us and our Lord. Just like in our human relationships, we can get sloppy sometimes and don't care for them very well. We need to come every week to be strengthened in our relationship with our Lord. We receive the good word of God's love. We receive the meal that God offers us. It's a meal of reconciliation. We make our peace. We make our offering. We can offer ourselves because God has made that peace with us, and declare that we are at one with God. God has done everything so that we can be in a perfect relationship. Because of God we can have and live with righteousness -- even righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and of the Pharisees. Amen.

Now may this peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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