

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Epiphany 6A
February 12, 2023
Matthew 5:21-37

A Better Righteousness

[Jesus said,] “You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . .” (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

Last week we heard Jesus say that He had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Then He warned His disciples about those who “[relax] one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same. . . . [and that] unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:17-20).

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was a righteousness of their own imagination. They thought that by their outward keeping of God’s commandments—at least by not doing anything really bad—they were certainly superior to the obviously bad people like the tax collectors and the prostitutes, and therefore they were keeping the Law well enough for God to reward them with eternal life. But Jesus doesn’t want His disciples to think that that’s the way it works. So He sets out to dispel that faulty notion.

You see, the scribes and Pharisees didn’t really keep or teach the Law. Rather, they tried to make the law easier, more manageable. An example of this was making an additional commandment about how far you could walk on the Sabbath, so you wouldn’t come close to breaking the Sabbath. The effect of this was that they got more hung up on their own manmade rules than they did with the true meaning with God’s commandments. And in so doing, they made the Law too soft. They made the Law into something they could manage. If you try real hard, you can control how far you walk on the Sabbath. And thus, the Pharisees could look good in front of others and look down their noses at the people who didn’t try as hard as they did. But meanwhile, they missed the whole point of the Sabbath, which has to do with stopping your normal work so you can pay attention to God’s Word, which never teaches that you can be righteous before God by your works.

The scribes and Pharisees thought that as long as they kept God’s commandments in their outward final form, they were keeping the Law well enough to earn their salvation. So, for example, they would think: “Well, I haven’t actually murdered anybody, have I? So I guess I’ve kept the ‘You shall not murder’ commandment.” But that is making God’s commandment too easy. So, Jesus has to show us the extent to which that commandment reaches. He says: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be

liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

Jesus is amping up the Law here. He's saying that it's not just the final outward act of murder, the actual taking of a life, that violates the commandment. It's everything that leads up to it, whether in thought, word, or deed. Anything you do that harms your brother, any harsh words you speak that injure his spirit—you're breaking the murder commandment. Don't soften that commandment down. I don't care who you are, you have committed murder, you have broken God's commandment. The same would be said of holding grudges and judging others.

Take another example: Adultery. The Pharisees would say that as long as they had not actually slept with another man's wife and committed adultery in that narrow sense, they had kept the commandment. But Jesus says, "No, you're making the Law too easy again." "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." You see, the sin problem starts in the heart. You think you've kept this commandment well enough for God to be impressed with you? Think again. The adultery commandment covers all sexual sins, again, whether in thought, word, or deed, whether male or female, and whether you're married or not. It's the lust in your heart that's the basic problem, not just the final act of lying with another man's wife.

Likewise, the scribes and Pharisees often made divorce too easy. Once Jesus was asked if a man could divorce his wife for any reason. Some were more strict in their teaching, others were quite permissive. In the end, Jesus says that marriage is to be one man and one woman for life. That's how God designed it and only God has the right to end a marriage, and that's by the death of the man or woman.

Jesus then warns about taking an oath. I often hear someone say, "I swear," needlessly and thoughtlessly. They don't know what they are saying. Jesus says, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil [or the evil one]." (Matt. 5:37).

Friends, we've all got an inner Pharisee within us. We want to think we're good enough for God to be pleased with us. "I'm certainly a better person than those bad people over there." This kind of relative righteousness comes naturally to us all. With a scribe's lawyerliness, we try to make excuses for our behavior and rationalize our sin, as though God can't see through what we're doing.

So Jesus has to strip away this veneer of self-righteousness, lest we fool ourselves into thinking we're good enough on our own. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees isn't righteous enough. If we think it is, we're not going to be interested in hearing about a Savior.

That's how it is with our trying to be righteous before God. You need a bigger righteousness than anything you can come up with. God's Law convicts us all. We all have

sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Oh, we may be outwardly respectable. We haven't committed murder, we haven't committed adultery, in the sense of the outward final act. But that's not good enough. God's Law extends to our inner thoughts, to the words that we speak, and to the acts that we do. To the wrong things we do and the right things we fail to do. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees isn't going to cut it. You will not inherit eternal life that way. You will not enter the kingdom of heaven that way. No, you need a bigger and better righteousness.

And since you can't find it in yourself, you have to find it somewhere else. Indeed, there is only one place you will find it, and that's in Jesus. He came to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus kept the Law of God perfectly, on your behalf. He always loved God with His whole heart. He always loved His neighbor as Himself. Thought, word, and deed—everything done the way it's supposed to be done. Righteousness fulfilled.

And yet, Jesus suffered the punishment that we poor sinners deserve—again, on our behalf. The judgment has been lifted off of you and placed onto Him. And because Jesus is the holy Son of God, His sacrifice covers all your sins. And in exchange, He gives you all His righteousness. Now you are judged righteous before God, because you are connected to Christ by faith. You are joined to Jesus' death and resurrection through your baptism and His righteousness is your righteousness. And it exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees — by far. It's the righteousness that Jesus freely gives you. God grant it for Jesus's sake. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener