

Have You Earned Heaven

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Matthew 5:20

FALSE STANDARDS OF RELIGION

In the text before us this morning Jesus directly confronts the false teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees - more specifically the false teaching of salvation by self-effort. Matthew 5:20 is a penetrating text. Here, in one sentence, Jesus draws a line in the sand between man-made religion and God-initiated salvation. The error of the Scribes and Pharisees was not a new error. Ever since the fall of man in the garden, man has erroneously tried to carve out a path to heaven by his own striving. The problem is that God will never be satisfied even by the highest standard of human righteousness. It's been said that outside of sin itself, the Bible opposes nothing more vehemently than the religion of human achievement. Why is that? Because a doctrine of salvation by human achievement denies any need for saving grace. If we could appease God and get to heaven on the basis of our own merit - our own law keeping - then Jesus died in vain. We know that is not the case.

Let me ask you a question...what is the purpose of God's Law? Paul asks us in Romans 7:13, "Did that which is good (the law), then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become *sinful beyond measure*." The primary purpose of the Law was to honor God, but the Law also stands to highlight or expose the exceeding sinfulness of sin. In doing so, it was also meant to function like a guardian or a schoolmaster pointing us to our desperate need for a Savior. Paul told the Galatians, "The Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith" Galatians 3:24. The Scribes and Pharisees saw the Law as the end to itself instead of a means to point us to grace. John MacArthur says:

The purpose of God's law was to show that, to please God and to be worthy of citizenship in His kingdom, more righteousness is required than anyone can possibly have or accomplish in himself. The purpose of the law was not to show what to do in order to make oneself acceptable, much less to show how good one already is, but to show how utterly sinful and helpless all men are in themselves. To Jesus' legalistic, works-oriented hearers, this was doubtlessly the most radical thing He had yet taught. If the meticulously religious and moral Pharisees could not get into heaven, who could?¹

¹ John MacArthur, *Matthew - The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 276.

THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

What do we know about the Scribes and Pharisees? The Scribes were those who recorded, studied, and interpreted Jewish law. As “teachers of the Law” they spent their days expounding and instructing others in the Word of God. In many respects they were considered to be the foremost authority when it came to matters of the Law of God. Of all the people they were the most saturated in the Scriptures, specifically the Law of God. They gave themselves to studying and to the accurately copying God’s Word, but unfortunately, despite all of their exposure to the Word, they missed its profound spiritual intent.

The Pharisees were well known for their religious sanctity. It’s interesting to note that the word Pharisee means “separatist”. As their name suggests, they set themselves apart from the common man in that they lived according to a rigid set of rules and regulations which often times exceeded that which was demanded by the Old Testament Scriptures. An example of this is recorded in Luke 18:9-14. Jesus told a parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” The Old Testament never demanded that a man must fast twice a week – only once a year in preparation for the Day of Atonement. Not only did the Pharisees create and hold themselves to this stringent code of law keeping, but they held their self-righteous standard over others as well. Matthew 23:4 Jesus says of the Pharisees, “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.” There is a little Pharisee in all of us.

The common man would have looked at the Pharisee and thought that he could never attain the level of righteousness possessed by the Pharisees. They were regarded as the upper crust of righteousness! As if the Pharisees’ standard wasn’t weighty enough, Jesus came along and made the real measure of righteousness completely unattainable. He said, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” Matthew 5:20. The point that Jesus is trying to make is that as righteous as the Scribes and Pharisees appeared to be, their standard wasn’t based on the righteousness of Christ. They possessed an external righteousness, but not the righteousness of Christ.

THE POTENTIAL DANGER OF UNINTENTIONAL HYPOCRISY

It was the hollow, legalistic religion of the Pharisees that Jesus abhorred. Matthew 23 is a clear picture of Jesus' disdain for the external piety of the Pharisees who, as legalistic as they were, did not love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30-31). Jesus called the Pharisees out for their moralism saying, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" Matthew 23:25-28.

This was Jesus' charge against the Pharisees:

1. The religion of the Pharisees was entirely external and formal instead of sincere and from the heart.
2. The religion of the Pharisees was one of man-made rules and regulations.
3. The Pharisees were more concerned with the ceremonial than with the moral.

The Pharisees were meticulous with things like hand washings, but they were flexible when it came to matters of morality. Turn to Matthew 15:1-9 and let's look at what Jesus said to the Pharisees.

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."'

4. The Pharisees were primarily concerned with their own self-righteousness, which led to the tragic result of becoming self-satisfied.

The ultimate aim of the Pharisees was not to glorify God, but to glorify themselves.

Why is this teaching so important for us to consider? It is important to consider because there is a very real possibility that we might deceive ourselves by looking to our moral attainment instead of Christ's righteousness on our behalf. There is the possibility of our relying and resting on the wrong thing. We, evangelicals, are not above this. Do you remember what Jesus said in Matthew 7:21-23? He said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" James Montgomery Boice says:

You can pile human goodness upon human goodness upon human goodness upon human goodness; you can refine and perfect it and polish it, but no matter how hard you try you fall short of God's standard because human righteousness is qualitatively different from the righteousness of God. It belongs to a different realm entirely. For instance if human goodness can be compared to light, then God's goodness (righteousness) must not be compared to light, but to something like mathematics... For that reason, God says, He cannot work with the good deeds that come from men, however much we may think of them, and instead [says that we must] receive the righteousness of Christ.²

AN EXAMPLE OF HUMBLE, HEART WORSHIP

The Apostle Paul was once a Pharisee. Let's look at Paul's personal testimony in Philippians 3:4-9:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...

As we read Paul's testimony we see something of a balance sheet. Under the assets column were all of his positions and achievements. He had no liabilities in his own mind (cf. Matthew 5:3). As to righteousness under the law – he considered himself to be blameless. But when Paul encountered Christ on the Damascus Road he was forever changed! His hard, self-worshipping, Pharisaical heart was broken. For the first time in his life he got a glimpse of what true righteousness looked like. He

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1972), 88.

saw all of his accomplishments as filthy rags before God (Isaiah 64:6). What was once an asset to Paul became a liability and in comparison to Christ, he counted them as rubbish that he might gain Christ. Instead of boasting in his own self-righteous resume, he now said, "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" Galatians 6:14-15.

WHAT IS JESUS TEACHING - TWO ERRORS

When Jesus says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," is He teaching that salvation is by works? Is He saying have we have to live a life that is better than the Pharisees? To understand the text in that manner would be to misunderstand the central point of what Jesus is communicating here. What does Paul tell us in Romans 3:9-11? He said, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

Jesus isn't teaching moralism, but neither is He teaching that since salvation granted on the basis of His righteousness alone that it doesn't matter what we do. Jesus isn't saying, "Because I have done it all, there is nothing for you to do... The emphasis of this text as well as the entirety of the Bible is the practical carrying out of the Law of God. Remember what James said in James 1:22-25? He said, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it - not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it - they will be blessed in what they do."

[Human goodness] although it will see a man through this life, often with flying colors, it will not see him to heaven. Our hope, and confidence and boast must be in Christ alone. He is our righteousness. We confess with Augustus Toplady:

*Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress,
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.
Rock of Ages, cleft for me;
Let me hide myself in thee!*