

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

The Lord takes His disciples away from the crowd. He takes them to be alone with Himself. And “opening His mouth”, the Scriptures record, “He taught them...” He first speaks the Beatitudes, the description of the blessed. But His description of the blessed is quite contrary to the world’s understanding of what it means to be blessed. The blessed that the Lord describes are poor in spirit, meek, mourning, hungering and thirsting.

He then blesses the Twelve, naming them the salt of the earth. He tells them that they are the light of the world. They would be that, but three years of discipleship, cross and tomb would come first. Knowing what lay ahead, alone with them on the mountain, He taught them saying: “Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”

These Words precede the Lord’s teaching to which we hearken this day: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of Heaven”, or better translated, “you shall surely never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Exclusion from heaven, eternal exclusion from the presence of God, is the consequence of unrighteousness. So it profits you greatly, it profits you eternally, in this life and in the next, to understand the Lord’s Words; and understanding, to conform your faith and life to that righteousness which He describes.

First, He did not come to destroy the Law. Indeed, the Law remains, until heaven and earth pass away. If this creation is still intact, the Law remains. It remains as a curb, a mirror, and a rule. It remains for every living man. The Law has no mastery over a dead man, for he can neither keep nor break it. But if you are alive, the Law is there. And where that is true, and that is true for you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall surely never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Lord does not, with these Words, refer you to the Law as a set of instructions, a list of rules to be kept in their narrow sense. That’s what the scribes and Pharisees thought the Law was, and their righteousness was insufficient. That is not what the Commandments are. For you have heard that it was said to those of old “You shall not murder.” But the Lord explains the true scope of the Fifth Commandment in a way that makes every man, in a way that makes each of you, a breaker of God’s Law.

For who among you has never been angry with another, or called another a pejorative name out loud, or even secretly in your heart? And in the case that you have an adversary, and that has been true of all men, your gifts and offerings are unwelcome at God’s altar. A lawbreaker, a sinner, is unworthy to make such offering.

So rightly understood, no living man can keep the Law. And failing to keep the Law prevents your entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. And the other kingdom, the only kingdom left when the Kingdom of Heaven is closed, is a kingdom of death and eternal suffering. No one there is blessed.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees...” the Lord teaches. By His Words He teaches that the scribes and Pharisees have righteousness, but that it is insufficient. Their righteousness was that of works. The Commandment demands that you not murder. They didn’t murder in the narrow sense, that is they did not, with their own hands, end another’s life wrongly. That they counted as righteousness. But the cross testifies against all of them.

The true meaning of the Commandment, however, is greater than simply abstaining from ending a life. The true meaning of the Commandment, of all the Commandments of God, goes not to acts of the hands, but to the thoughts of the heart. It applies not only to the external, but the internal, not just to deed but to will and desire. Rightly understood, the Commandments unwrap the hollow righteousness of men, to expose the sin inside of every man. And if that were all there was, there would be no hope, no hope for any of us.

But there is hope. There is hope in the Word of the Lord, for He says “Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy, but fulfill.” A Law fulfilled cannot accuse. The righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees is the righteousness of Christ. His righteousness is perfect righteousness. And where His righteousness is found, the Law has no mastery. For against love there is no Law.

He, being without sin, willingly covered Himself with your sins. He stood as the greatest Law-Breaker of all time. Still, He was never angry with His brothers without cause, and yet He endured judgment. Although innocent, He was condemned by the council. Although He spoke blessing, healed, cured, and raised the dead, He suffered the torments of one excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven, the torments of separation from God, even death on the cross.

It is Christ that was delivered by His adversaries to the judge, and by the judge handed over to the officers, and arrested. And He did by no means escape until He had paid the last penny – the last penny of your debt to God, the entirety of the debt of all men of all time. He paid not with gold or silver, but with His Holy, Precious Blood. The price of your redemption was His life, which He gave freely in love, in mercy, in grace. He fulfilled the Law.

He left His Offering on the altar of Calvary, giving there His life for yours, taking your sin to the grave forever. That death becomes yours, as the Apostle writes, in Holy Baptism. Therefore, you were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so you also should walk in newness of life. Your old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin be done away with, that you no longer be slaves of sin.

The righteousness that the Law describes is freely given to you, you who believe in Christ. Believing, your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, for your righteousness is not an external righteousness, but a righteousness, by God’s grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. Having that righteousness, baptized, filled with His Spirit, believing, hearing His Word, you shall surely enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, that Kingdom comes when God gives you His Holy Spirit, the Spirit you received as Christ’s righteousness was washed into you.

In Christ, you are the blessed. You receive comfort. You are the heirs. You are fed by His Body, and given to drink from the Cup of Salvation. You are shown mercy. You are called sons of God, for you have entered His Kingdom of Heaven. Your gifts are accepted at His altar, where He gives you Gifts that surpass time and space, saving Gifts. For you who have been united together with Christ in the likeness of His death, certainly you also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.

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