

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

Holy Scripture holds up two kinds of righteousness for you to compare. One is, truth be told, no righteousness at all. Nonetheless it is the one most popular with men. To fallen men the other seems to be not righteousness, but weakness. So it is with the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom is not like the kingdom of men. God's ways are not the ways of sinful men.

The Lord teaches His disciples, and by their inspired, inerrant record He teaches you, that "...unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." At first blush, it's easy to say "well, that's not a problem for me, I'm no Pharisee." But consider how hard the scribes and Pharisees worked at achieving righteousness. And if you do, and if you're honest, you'll confess you haven't tried as hard as they did. You haven't even come close.

The Scribes and Pharisees were experts in external righteousness. Their lives were dedicated to their religion. They memorized the Scriptures. They were consumed with keeping the Law. Their every day was carefully choreographed to ensure that they did not outwardly transgress God's ceremonial or civil commands.

They actively adhered to elaborate systems of religious rituals. They engaged in repeated daily worship and prayer. They waited anxiously for the Messiah. In many ways their lives were consumed with the pursuit of righteousness. But the Lord condemns them. Their righteousness wasn't enough. And yet unless your righteousness exceeds theirs, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Scribes and the Pharisees appeared righteous - on the outside. And like any fallen man, they wanted to be regarded by men as righteous. The Scriptures report that they wanted others to see their righteousness. But faith isn't braggadocious. Theirs was only an external observance, a skin-deep righteousness, a righteousness for show.

By it, they deceived others. They even deceived themselves. But they, like all men, utterly failed to keep the Law. For it is not external works that determine the keeping of the Law. It is not what other men think of you. It is the heart that matters. And so it is with you. Men may see what is on the outside, but God sees what is in your heart.

The Holy Law of God requires a pure heart, a heart in you that fears and loves God above all things. The Ten Commandments require a pure heart, a heart in you that loves your neighbor as yourself. Fooling men by external show is the false religion that Saint James describes: "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless."

Truth be told, every man is soiled by sin. You have been soiled by sin. But it is not an external soiling that can be removed. Sin pollutes the heart. And over time, you have accommodated your internal sinfulness, trying even to deceive yourself with outward shows of religiosity. But hear the Word of the Lord: whoever does such things "...is in danger of hell fire." For those whose hearts are unclean will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

The holy Law of God is not the problem. The demands of the Law are just. The Law is perfect and will remain as long as the heavens and the earth. But no man born of Adam can keep it. The fig leaf of a forced smile and false piety can't cover your sin. You need a Savior. And for you there is Good News: your Savior has come. In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem you who were under the law, that you might receive the adoption as a son.

Christ came not to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. He loved God above all things, being faithful even unto death. He truly loved His neighbor as Himself, for He died at the hands of His neighbors to save them and you. And in the spilling of His precious blood the once-for-all sacrifice was made.

He was delivered to the officer bearing your sins, and condemned by earthly judges. He was crucified by the soldiers, forsaken by God the Father, and thrown into the prison of death, that you be declared innocent. The Law has been fulfilled. God's wrath has been appeased. The price has been paid, even to the last penny. But that dark garden prison could not hold Him, even with its seal and armed guard.

Believing in Him, all your sins are forgiven. In Him, believing in Him, you are reconciled to God and to your brother. You are washed in the washing that can remove sin. You were buried with Him through baptism into death. So the Apostle writes "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?" So faith says to the same Christ "Whither Thou goest, I will go; and whither Thou lodgest, I will lodge; whither Thou diest, I will die."

And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so you now walk in newness of life. He gives His Spirit to dwell in you, to fill you, to lead you in the ways of righteousness, to create a new heart within you.

Christ's righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, and indeed of all men. His righteousness is perfect. By grace, believing in Him, Christ's righteousness is declared to be your righteousness. You no longer seek external righteousness, for true righteousness is the righteousness of faith, faith that fills your heart by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And so it is that your works are pleasing to God, for you are led to do that which is accord with His good and perfect will. Your works are the fruits of faith.

Today He feeds you with His Body and His Blood. You eat and drink a foretaste of the heavenly wedding feast of the Lamb and His Bride. In Christ you love God with your whole heart. In Christ you love your neighbor as yourself. In Christ, you will certainly enter the kingdom of heaven, for whither thy risen Lord goeth, there dear Christian wilt thou go; and whither thine ascended Lord lodgest, there, dear Christian, wilt thou lodge, for eternity.

So reckon yourself to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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