

Real Righteousness

Ponder: Exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees

Scripture: “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20, NKJV).

Both Jesus and His forerunner, John the immerser, preached the same message: “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2 & 4:17). Anyone interested in participating in that Messianic kingdom and being with the Lord eternally in Heaven should pay careful attention to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus expressed the theme of that masterpiece in Matt. 5:20 (quoted above).

What, then, does it mean to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? I’ve actually heard people say that since the Pharisees tithed 10% and fasted twice a week (Lk. 18:12), a disciple of Jesus must give at least 11% and fast three times weekly! May I kindly but emphatically say that such ideas miss the point entirely!

Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees wasn’t because they didn’t give enough or fast often enough! The whole Sermon on the Mount shows that whereas the Pharisees looked primarily (or perhaps exclusively) at outward behavior, Jesus focused on the heart. Real righteousness must begin in the heart.

For example, the Pharisees certainly knew that the sixth and seventh commandments forbade murder and adultery. By their standards, as long as you didn’t literally, physically murder or commit adultery, you were righteous. But Jesus insisted that the hatred in your heart that leads to murder, and the lust in your heart that leads to adultery, are offensive to God also.

We, too, face the danger of over-emphasizing outward, visible obedience while neglecting matters of the heart. Here’s a person who is at services “every time the door is open.” That’s good! Keep it up! But what if that person harbors hatred toward others of a different skin tone, different political persuasion, or even a different religion? Being a “faithful Christian” certainly involves more than just showing up at services, important as that is.

Even good behaviors (praying, fasting, helping the unfortunate) must be done from godly motives within the heart (Matt. 6:1-18). Jesus set the example; let’s be like Him!

Hymn: “Oh To Be Like Thee”

Prayer: Righteous Father, create within us a clean heart, and help us to have pure motives for all that we do. In Jesus’ name, Amen.