

## **The Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity Sunday, July 19, 2009**

*The Rev. Stephen C. Scarlett*

In the gospel today Jesus said, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20f.).

When we hear how Jesus talks about the Pharisees in the New Testament, we might think that exceeding their righteousness would be no big deal. However, the Pharisees were not a uniquely loathsome bunch. They would share at least some similarities with modern patriots of various stripes who believe that obedience to God is a prerequisite for God’s blessing upon a nation.

The Pharisees arose in Israel in response to the judgment that took place at the end of the Old Testament. Israel went into exile in Babylon, the prophets said, because the people were unfaithful to the Torah. In reaction, a movement arose that aimed to make sure that never happened again.

We can see the seeds of the outlook of the Pharisees in the person of Nehemiah, about whom we just read in the evening lectionary. Nehemiah was an officer in the Persian royal court. He traveled to Israel, with the king’s permission, to assist in the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah found that many of the Jews who had returned to the land were lax in the faith. Nehemiah 13 gives us two examples of how he dealt with it. Some people were trying to buy and sell on the Sabbath day. Nehemiah posted some of his servants at the city gate and warned people that if they attempted to buy or sell on the Sabbath again, “I will lay hands on you!”

There were also some Jewish men who had married pagan women. Nehemiah 13:25 records his response: “I contended with them and cursed them and pulled out their hair.” And he made them swear by God that they wouldn’t do this anymore. Then Nehemiah prayed, “Remember me, O my God, for good!”

The title “Pharisee” did not come along until much later, but, as I said, we can see the seeds of the later attitude. The central theme of the Pharisee was zeal for the law. The Pharisee did not think he was perfect or saved by his good works. Rather, he thought that if Israel would be zealous to obey the Law of Moses, this zeal would cause God to look favorably upon Israel and restore the nation to her former glory.

There was logic in this way of thinking. For if God’s judgment came upon Israel because she was disobedient and unfaithful to the Torah, it was reasonable to conclude that renewed obedience and faithfulness would lead to renewed blessing from God.

But this conclusion was wrong nonetheless. The point of God’s judgment on Israel was not that with more zeal another generation might succeed where Old Testament Israel failed. The point was that Old Testament Israel highlighted the inherent flaw in human nature: Because of sin, no one is able to fulfill God’s covenant, no matter how zealous one is. As Romans says, “By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in [God’s] sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (3:20).

Jesus criticized the Pharisees because, even as they showed great zeal for national obedience, they were blind to their own sin. This is the danger of all moral crusades. For example, a preacher may go on the warpath against lust and gluttony, but be unaware of his own anger and covetousness. He attacks the sins of others, but does not see his own sin.

In the gospel, Jesus gives an example that highlights the ubiquitous nature of sin: Those of old said, “Don’t murder,” but I say “Don’t be angry.” If we look only at external behavior, we may say, “I have never killed anyone and am innocent of offense against the sixth commandment.” But when we look at the heart, we discover that we have been angry at others and desired evil for them. By the higher standard, we are guilty of murder in the heart.

The righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees examines the thoughts and intentions of the heart and not just our external behavior. Thus, this form of righteousness always begins with confession. To be truly righteous, we must first acknowledge that, no matter how much moral effort we expend and no matter how many good thoughts we try to think, we will still fall short of God’s glory. We will still need to be saved from God’s righteous judgment on sin.

God’s answer to the dilemma of sin was to send his Son into the world. Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law. He was faithful where Israel was unfaithful. He did for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. Consequently, we are justified before God, not by our zeal or moral effort, but by our faith in him.

This is what baptism is all about. The epistle (Romans 6:3f.) explains that baptism unites us with the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are made righteous, not by virtue of anything we have done, but because in baptism we died to our former way of life and we rose to new life in Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Life in the Spirit is a new kind of life. It is lived in a sort of paradox. Because we have the Holy Spirit, we are better than we were. We are able to love in new ways. We have the hope, the assurance, that we will be made perfect. But the Holy Spirit also makes us aware of the many ways that we fail to love as we ought. The Spirit causes us to examine our hearts in the full light of day and does not allow us to be content with the outward appearance of righteousness. Thus, we aim and strive for purity of motive and intention, even as we freely confess that the highest and best we can do will always fall short of the glory of God. Faith in Jesus assumes that we are sinners, but is content with nothing less than divine perfection.

Because our righteousness is rooted in the acknowledgment of our own sin, the gospel message can never have the sense that we, the good, are confronting all those bad people out there. Rather, the gospel is always an invitation for other sinners to join us in experiencing the grace of forgiveness and the power of new life.

This is the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, through which we enter the kingdom and have the hope of resurrection and life in the world to come.

[www.stmatthewsacc.com/sermons](http://www.stmatthewsacc.com/sermons)  
949-219-0911