HOW GOOD DO I HAVE TO BE?

April 29, 2018 Mt. 5:20

How do understand the word—‘righteousness’? A right understanding of this word is key to understanding these words of Jesus to His disciples in this portion of the sermon on the mount.

Jesus says: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

You mean Jesus, that I have to be better than the scribe who knew and taught the Old Testament writings and better than the Pharisee who, in his own eyes, lived up to the legal regulations of the books of Moses?

How can anyone know more or do more than these guys?

How good do I have to be? Here is Jesus’ word on this. Later in this chapter, v. 48, Jesus is talking about how we are to love one another and says: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

There you are. You want to go to heaven? Just be perfect. Well, the scribes and Pharisees thought that they were. People looked up to them as paragons of virtue. If anyone deserves heaven, they surely do. This was also the thought in Luther’s day of those who lived in a monastery. They were giving their whole life to God and were certain to be taken to heaven.

But, wait. Is heaven given as a gift or is it earned? Let’s get back to that word ‘righteousness’. It has the same Greek root word as the word ‘justify’—dikaiou, which means to declare right. The doctrine of Justification is the major teaching of the Christian faith and is what Luther discovered as he was reading the book of Romans.

When you and I received faith as God’s gift at our baptism, we were at that point justified with God. It’s just as if we had never sinned. We are now perfect. Sin free. This is our status before our holy God.

Baptism is the means God has chosen to give to us what Jesus accomplished on Calvary. Forgiveness.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. It’s God’s free gift to us. Point is, do all gladly receive this gift?

Sadly, no. It’s easy to be a scribe of Pharisee. It’s a state of mind. He conforms his life to God’s word, might go to church, reads the Bible, prays, does many good things---and for all this expects God to reward him with heaven. Remember the Pharisee and the Publican in the temple praying? The Pharisee says—“I thank you God that I am not like that man over there; I give a tenth of all I have and do many good things.” The Publican simply says: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

The Publican received God’s mercy while the Pharisee was rejected.

In fact, Jesus spoke of the Pharisee in Matthew 23: He calls them blind guides, doing all their deeds to be seen by others. Woe to you, hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, full of dead men’s bones. You look beautiful outside but inside you are full of uncleanness.

The righteousness of the Pharisee, then and now is only civil righteousness, not spiritual. They pride themselves on what they do and so what is missing is faith in the free gift of forgiveness from God.

“For it is by grace you are saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

So, does our holiness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Most certainly, if you look to Jesus as your only Savior. Their lack of trust in God’s promise to forgive sin thru the sacrifice of Jesus will keep them from heaven.

True Christian righteousness or faith, far exceeds the righteousness of ancient and modern Pharisee. How so? It does not come from love of self but from from humble, grateful love of the merciful God in heaven and from unselfish love of your neighbor. Scripture says: “Love is the fulfilling of the Law of God.”

We do not do our good works with the idea of pleasing God and so meriting heaven. We confess our sinfulness and fall on God’s mercy to forgive. Our only hope is on the blood of Jesus that has cleansed us from all sin.

We come to church to take a little rest from the daily grind of life. To hear God’s word of Law and Gospel so that our walk with Him will stay strong so that we will not lose the crown of life He has promised to all who love Him.

We come here because we know we need what God offers----to hear again that all our sins are forgiven at the cross of Jesus. To be immersed in a steady diet of the Word of God which can help families to be spiritually strong. To prepare our children to go out into the world and not lose their way due to the devil, the world and their own sinful flesh.

We come here to maintain the hope we have that even though we are not the perfect Christian we would like to be, we know that our faith in Jesus, God’s free gift, makes us perfect.

We can, therefore, stand before God on judgment day, knowing that by the grace of God, heaven is my home.

Amen