

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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Righteousness is about relationship.

In nomine...

I. Sermon on the Mount

Last week our Gospel readings started following the Sermon on the Mount. I love the Sermon on the Mount because it is practical, accessible, understandable. I love the Sermon on the Mount because it is encouraging to me. In these three short chapters of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus provides a handbook on what it means to live in the Kingdom of God. These chapters are the basis of Dallas Willard's book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, which a few of us around here have read.

But despite all the ways the Sermon on the Mount can be helpful and encouraging, it can be frightening as well. It sets a high bar not only for my behaviors but for my motivations! Today's lesson warns that none of the law or the prophets will cease to have effect: all of them pertain to me! That's a lot of law! And the most frightening line of all, for me, comes at the very end of today's Gospel lesson: *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

What am I supposed to do with that?!?

II. Righteousness as Law-Keeping

Can you imagine what Jesus' disciples thought when they heard Jesus say this? They knew who the scribes and Pharisees were. These were the people who knew God's law, cherished God's law, who shaped their entire lives around God's law. The scribes and the Pharisees were the inheritors not only of God's law, but of a conversation about how to keep God's law that had been running down through the generations, from teacher to disciple, for hundreds of years! These were professional keepers of God's law! How could anyone else possibly be more righteous than they were?

The scribes and the Pharisees knew all the right rituals, they said all the right prayers, they could quote laws and amazing quantities of commentary about laws from memory. For a legalist, "righteousness" is a technical term concerned specifically with adherence to a particular understanding of the law. It is a black & white matter. It can be measured in terms of yes's or no's and tallied up on a scorecard. It was easy to know if you are keeping the law or not. If you study hard enough, you can know what was expected of you. Can you then keep it all perfectly? Maybe. Maybe not.

I must confess, I'm a rule follower. I'm told that's a common characteristic of oldest children, but I bet a few of you who aren't first-borns also share this characteristic with me. I'm all about knowing the rules so I can stay on the right side of them. Life just seems to go better that way. I can relate to the zeal and even joy that is to be found in knowing the law and doing it. The ability to know and navigate the law is a means to power for those with the resources to accomplish it. It's a means to making myself righteous. But here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is calling his disciples to something more! Self-righteousness is not God's intent at all!

III. Righteousness as Relationship

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus teaches his disciples that “**righteousness**” is about **relationship**. In this, Jesus stands firmly in the line of the Hebrew prophets. Last week Doyt walked us through the admonitions of the prophet Micah. The people thought they could manipulate God with their actions, offering sacrifices. They complied with the law, technically, but were far from its intent in spirit. What God really wanted from God’s people was quite simple: relationships marked by justice, kindness, and humility. Sacrifices were meant not to separate but to draw people together for a special meal, similar to our modern practices of Thanksgiving and Christmas. Sacrifices weren’t about dining alone in an exclusive club: they were supposed to be more like Superbowl parties, full of friends enjoying each other’s company on a special day.

Isaiah is dealing with the same issue that confronted Micah! The people fast and wonder why God doesn’t respond. The prophet tells them that God is not impressed by their abstention from food. Because righteousness is about relationship. Fasting is not meant to be the goal, but the backdrop for the work of prayer and introspection. An empty tummy is not what God is after. Instead, fasting creates inside a person a bigger emptiness, a vulnerability. It makes space for something new and different. An instinctive response to emptiness and vulnerability is to become grumpy, to lash out at others with quarrels and complaints. That’s what was happening inside Isaiah’s community. But with prayer and the help of God’s Holy Spirit, fasting can lead one to empathize with those who face lack, can lead to sharing not only one’s food, but also clothing, shelter, and self. Fasting, carefully observed, can lead to deeper relationships and can create space within you for fuller engagement with whom God created you to be.

IV. Conclusion

This is the kind of righteousness Jesus is talking about. **Righteousness is about relationship.** Both here in the Sermon on the Mount, and throughout the Gospels, Jesus is concerned not with how people are doing on the scorecard of technical law-following, but how they're doing with the care and nurture of genuine relationships. Jesus sums up his instruction in the Sermon on the Mount: *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.* The intent of God's law is to teach you and I what it means to be our whole selves, our true selves; to guide us into well-being and into satisfying relationship. This is the peace, the *shalom*, the wholeness, the holiness that God intends for each of us.

And the good news is this: as we are formed as disciples of Jesus, learning to live out of our truest, most authentic selves, those selves that were made in the image of God, we will naturally, easily, and abundantly surpass the anemic "righteousness" argued about by the scribes and the Pharisees and the legalists of our own times. As our lives reflect not mere technical adherence to a set of rules or doctrines, but the very image of the God, our lives will naturally overflow with a generous and whole-hearted love and affection for all God's children. Thus our righteousness will vastly exceed that of the legalists and we will find ourselves already living in God's kingdom.

V. P.S. Ash Wednesday

Since Isaiah brought it up, I want to end today with a couple notes on the idea of fasting.

First, Ash Wednesday is coming up in just a few weeks, on March 1st. Mark your calendars! Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are the only two official “Fast Days” appointed by the Book of Common Prayer. Lent, the season in between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, is widely known as a season of fasting or abstention. You don’t want to miss these opportunities.

Lent is a season provided by the church in her ancient wisdom to help you and I along a time-tested path to knowing Jesus and to becoming the people that God made us to be. In fasting we choose to suffer, as Jesus chose to suffer, for the purpose of creating space inside ourselves to encounter God.

Second, I find it amusing that certain diets, like Atkins or Paleo or Whole-30 or anything with the word “cleanse” in it are considered normal and healthful, but there is frequently a violent recoil from any suggestion of fasting for spiritual reasons.

Overcoming the knee-jerk emotional barrier is part of the value of fasting. Fasting helps us re-evaluate what’s important in life. Fasting is a gift, not a demand. Watch your Weekly Word in the coming weeks for an article with practical advice on fasting.

But for today, remember that righteousness is not about measuring up to a certain kind of behavior or of performing certain acts. **Righteousness is about relationship.** In the Sermon on the Mount and throughout Scripture, God is calling us to love God and love our neighbor. Life in the kingdom is that simple – and that profound.

Sermon Questions

1. It is possible to follow the law without being righteous?
2. Is it possible to be righteous without following the law?
3. Is it possible to be more righteous than the religious professionals?