

Righteousness means doing God's will. I think we can all agree with that. We know that we should be doing what God wants us to do. But the question that I ask you today, Christians, is this. How do we know that we are doing God's will? How can we be sure that we are doing our heavenly Father would have us do? Because, honestly, there's a couple different ways that we could try to do this. And the one way, I'm afraid, is far more common. Because we can try to do God's will by thinking of the law, thinking of what God has given to us, as a kind of checklist. That if we have kept a certain number of laws as best as we can, checked them off the list as it were, then we can say, hey! Maybe we are keeping God's will. Number one, for example, God wants us to do this. Have we done it? Yes. Okay, we're good. Number two, God wants us to do this. Have we done it? Yes. Okay. We're probably good there too. Number three, God wants us to do this. Have we done it? No! Uh-oh. Now what do we do? Maybe we aren't as righteous as we think that we are. Well actually, what probably happens more commonly is we say, "Well, if you look at it this way, you look at what I did this way, then I actually have kept the law, so I can check it off and I am righteous after all."

But the problem with this kind of mentality, Christians, of having the law as something that we can check off, something that we can at least in theory keep, is that it's not at all different from the way that the world thinks about righteousness. Ask anybody who says they are a good person why they are a good person, and you're going to get a checklist. I haven't done this. I've been doing this. I loved my neighbor. I've done all of these good things. Check, check, check, check, check! Therefore, I must be righteous. I must be a good person." Because thinking of the law as that little contained thing is exactly the way that the world thinks.

Now, unfortunately, it's also the way that the Pharisees think in our Gospel reading for today. Because the Pharisees, you might remember, are those Jews who not only tried to keep the law of God, but they believe that there were other laws that God didn't write down and they try to keep those too. So, when they do all of their traditions and all the things that they're trying to do, they figure as long as I do them down to the letter, because I can check them off, then I'm doing God's will. For example, if I eat in a particular way and I do it perfectly, I've kept the law of God, so the Pharisee thinks. Or as long as I don't take more than 2000 steps on the Sabbath, then I'd kept the commandment. I'm doing what God wants me to do. Check, check, check, check, check, all the way down the line. Because that's, again, the way that the world and the Pharisees think.

If we think that way too, Christians, when we hear Jesus say to us, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," and if we're thinking in terms of that checklist, we're going to hear Jesus say, "I'm giving you an even tougher law than the Pharisees and the scribes have. They're down here. You've gotta be all the way up here, and as long as you're trying your hardest to keep this law all the way up here, then that's what it's going to mean to be righteous!" But the problem with that, of course, is this isn't what Jesus means. But if we hear it from that direction, if we hear it in this way, we're going to end up in one of two spots. We're either going to say, A. I'm just like the Pharisees. I can keep this law. I can do what God wants me to do. And therefore I'm going to keep this higher, more difficult law. We've seen that in Christian history, actually. The monks, for example, thought this way. They thought they were keeping these higher laws, these greater

commandments that Jesus had given, and that made them better than ordinary Christians. It's one of the reasons why we had the Reformation, to correct this kind of abuse.

But honestly, I think what's going to more likely happen to us is this. We're going to see that law all the way up here in our minds and say, I can't do that! There's no way I can keep that! Who could possibly keep such a high standard as that? So I'm not even going to try. I'm a sinner, after all. I'm going to fail. So why should I try? Jesus will forgive me anyway. I'm going to go on living the way that I have lived all this time, because, you know what, I can't keep the law anyway. But that's just as dangerous, Christians! Shall we sin, Paul says, that grace may abound? Shall we go on sinning so that we can say we can be forgiven even more? By no means! That's not why God has given us his will! That's not why God has given us the law. We are not called to sin. We are called to be righteous in the sight of God. So let us not be like the world then, and like the Pharisees, doing according to a checklist and treating God's will in that way.

But the other way that we can look at this, Christians, is what Jesus is talking about for today. When Jesus says to us, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," he means it! But what he means is that righteousness is something completely different from a checklist. It's not about keeping this little group of laws perfectly. That's not what righteousness is as Christians. To be righteous in the sight of God means to be like God. It means to think like him. It means to act like him. It means to do all of the things that he does. And when we are like God because we are in God, we are righteous in his sight.

Jesus gives us examples of what he means in our Gospel reading for today, talking specifically about anger. So Jesus says this, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment." Of course, as we remember from our confirmation days, that's the Fifth Commandment. You shall not murder. What does that mean, according to Jesus? If we think of it in terms of that checklist, that checklist mentality that the world and the Pharisees have, we're going to think of it in terms of, "I haven't actually murdered anyone. I haven't killed anybody, so that must mean, check! I've kept the law." Jesus says, no! There's more to it than that. He says, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council. And whoever says, you fool, will be liable to the hell of fire." In other words, it's more than just checking it off in that outward sense. To be like God, in this sense, means that all of these things that Jesus is talking about become unthinkable! They become completely foreign to our way of thinking. We wouldn't want to be angry with our brother, because we are in God. We wouldn't want to insult our brother, because we are in God. And we wouldn't call him an idiot either, because we are in God.

Of course, now, that's a difficult thing for us. We are still in sin, as it were. We are still struggling with this body of death. But the difference between that checklist mentality, which says that I've kept it when I do it according to my terms, and being in Christ and being like Christ, is that when I am in Christ and like Christ when I see my failings, I will ask for forgiveness. But then I will strive to be more and more like him. I won't leave myself in those sins. I want to become more like Jesus.

Take the next one, for example. Jesus says this. "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." You got to hear Jesus as he's saying this in his exaggerated way to get his point. The only place that you can take a gift to the altar, is in the only altar in Israel, which is at Jerusalem. That's the only one. That's the only place God ever set up an altar in those days. So you'd have to go all the way to Jerusalem to offer a gift before the altar. But Jesus is saying these words up in Galilee, a full 80 miles north of Jerusalem. It's quite a long ways. So then what he's saying is, up in Galilee, if you take your gift down to Jerusalem, 80 miles and probably a three day journey to get there, when you are in the very act of offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother all the way back in Galilee has something against you, leave the gift there. Go back to Galilee, 80 miles and three days later, be reconciled with your brother, and then go back to Jerusalem, 80 miles and three days later, and offer your gift at the altar. Because the most important thing here, Christians, is the fact that we should be reconciled with one another, to go 160 miles and a week out of our way to be reconciled to our brother who had something against us, rather than offer our gift in hypocrisy. Because, Christians, Jesus has gone out of his way too, far out of his way. When he came down from heaven to become like one of us, lowering himself completely, so that we would be reconciled to him. If he has reconciled us to himself, Should we who are in Christ not also be reconciled to one another?

Or think about Jesus' last example. "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." Don't take your brother to court, to that place where the checklist mentality is at its fullest. We're not insisting on our rights, but forgiving one another, being reconciled with one another, loving one another as God has first loved us. Even as we are walking into that courtroom, be reconciled, so that we don't have to go through with that. Because Jesus himself has not given us the judgment we deserve. Jesus himself has shown us love when we didn't deserve it. Ought we not too, as Christians, show love to one another?

Because that's what it means, Christians, to be righteous. To be like Jesus in every way. To think like him, to act like him, to be like him, to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven, to be reconciled to one another as we have been reconciled to the Father, to do everything with the mind of Christ, because we are being transformed, changed into something new, having put on Christ in our Baptisms, becoming like him in everything. To be righteous, dear Christians, means to be like Jesus. And when we are in Jesus, we will be like him.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.