

✠ Jesu Juva ✠

### Perfect Righteousness

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The meat of my text is the first verse from the Gospel reading heard earlier. But to give you some background, I'm including optional verses from the lectionary. *St Matthew, chapter 5, verse 17-20* – “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” This is our text.

In the Name of Jesus, Your Perfect Righteousness.

The Gospel reading is from the early portion of Jesus' first discourse. It is known as the Sermon on the Mount and includes chapters five, six, and seven of the Gospel according to St Matthew. He is speaking to the disciples, but this is far more than the twelve. God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on another mountain – Mount Sinai (*Exo 20:1-17*). Now, Jesus, God incarnate, sits on this Galilean mountain and speaks. The debate still rages whether Jesus is speaking law, how to live to please God, or Gospel, how God, particularly Jesus, has taken care of it all.

He says, “unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Notice. He doesn't say “unless your righteousness is equal to, as good as, the same as, or even nearly as good as the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, but exceeds, is greater than, surpasses.” Because the Pharisees and scribes, in their own eyes, were perfect keepers of the law, then if our righteousness must exceed theirs, who can enter the kingdom of heaven? I'll tell you – **YOU CAN!** But more about that in a moment.

Paul wrote the church in Philippi, “(*Phi 3:5, 6b*) [I was] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ... as to righteousness, under the law blameless.” In other words, as a Pharisee, he was perfect. There was no reason anybody, including God, could complain against him about his actions. Wow! Would you dare say that? What does John say, “(*I John 1:10*) If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and His word is not in us.” But remember, Paul was saying this about himself before he was converted by the Holy Spirit in Damascus.

Jesus said to the Jews, “(*John 5:39*) You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me.” What were they looking for? Maybe a loop-hole. People look for loop-holes in the income tax code to avoid paying so much in taxes. The Pharisees and scribes weren't really looking for a loop-hole, but in the end that's what it became. They wanted to make sure they had found all the laws of Scripture. Then they wouldn't accidentally break one and sin, or worse, break one of the Ten Commandments. But it doesn't work.

When I was stationed in Germany, I made three 2-week long tours in Saudi Arabia. We got to experience, from the far outside, the Muslim culture. Five times a day, they stop all activity and pray. If we were in our room watching TV, at the time of prayer, the screen would go blank except for a message scrolling across the bottom reminding us it was prayer time. If we were downtown, the stores would all close. There is something to be said about this devout practice. I bring this up not to praise their devotion to a false god, but to highlight a Pharisaical attitude among some. The Koran police roamed the streets making sure the stores were closed and people were praying. But they were not praying. They were enforcing the law of the Koran. Had they discovered the secret to perfection as the Pharisees and scribes had so they no longer had to observe the law themselves? Were they keeping the law by making sure everybody else was keeping it? Doesn't work for the Moslem, the Jew, or the Christian, because we all sin everyday of our lives.

The Pharisees were often on Jesus' case because He apparently broke the law, or at least the traditions of the Hebrew patriarchs. Frankly, if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew what these Johnny-come-lately religious leaders were passing on as having come from them, they'd roll over in their graves. The religious leaders were watching Him that they might accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath: healing, more than once; picking grain to eat; and more.

But we must be careful that we don't become Pharisees ourselves. St Paul writes, "*(Rom 3:23)* all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Not some have sinned, but all. Since the day Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit, sin has been welded into our DNA. As we just sang. We are all born sinners. We are guilty of sinning before we take our first breath. St David writes, "*(Psa 51:5)* Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." We constantly do wrong, not only in deed, not only in word, but also and secretly in our thoughts. Sometimes our sinful deeds are not things we do that are wrong. We don't rob a bank, but it may be things we don't do. We don't try to prevent some one from being robbed when we know in advance, or see it going down before us.

Because we are constantly sinning, we decide we must do something to fix it. We've dug ourselves into a deep hole. We have to get out, so we start digging. Unfortunately, as we throw the dirt up over our heads out of the hole, a lot of it lands on our heads again. We try to fix our sinfulness, to pay the price of our sins, but not by paying the real price that is owed – "The wages of sin is death."

There are two religions in the world, and only two. There is the religion of works and the religion of grace through faith in Christ Jesus. Islam, Judaism, all of the Eastern religions, and "I'm spiritual not religious" are all religions of works. I save myself; I unlock the gate into heaven by my works. Since I've gotten myself into this mess, by-golly, I'm going to get myself out. How are you doing at that? How do we even think that will work!? Isaiah writes, "*(Isa 46:12)* Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness." Then later, he writes a verse we are much more familiar with, "*(Isa 64:6)* We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." The best things we do are nothing more than filthy, smelly, blood-soaked rags. How do you clean the windshield of your car? Certainly not with a rag slopping wet with oil. Nor can we clean up sinfulness with a rag soaked in the bloody sweat of our works, but blood is involved!

Quoting David, Paul writes to the *(Romans 3:10)*, "as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one.'" Again David writes, "*(Psalm 34:17-19)* When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all." What's going on? How can we have it both ways? Easy! This is the religion of grace – God's undeserved favor to you!

After his conversion, Paul recognized he was not blameless, far from it. In Romans chapter 7, he records his still unrighteous, undeserving life – "*(Rom 7:18-19)* For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." I have the same problem. But God has taken care of it.

Christ Jesus paid the price you and I, all people, owe for their sins, for our rebellion, for our unrighteousness. He was crucified, but God raised Him to life. Christ took our filthy, stinky robe of sin on His shoulders and in Holy Baptism gave us His robe of perfect righteousness. Paul writes, "*(Rom 6:6-7)* We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin." Luther explains, "*{SC, IV-4}* [Baptism] indicates that the old Adam, that is our old sinful nature, in us should by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity." What a wonderful gift! It is all free! It's by grace, not by our works. Jesus worked, but we receive. Again, "*(Rom 6:23)* For the wages of sin is death, **but** the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The perfectly righteous Son of God became sin for you and me (*II Cor 5:21*). He became like that blood-soaked rag, that we might be made righteous. That's how we can have righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. That's how the scribes and Pharisees, Nicodemus, for example, can have righteousness that far surpasses the righteousness they thought they had through keeping the 613 laws and traditions of the first covenant perfectly. Christ died and rose. He gave us His body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine of His Supper for the forgiveness of our sins – making us righteous, perfectly righteous as He is. He abides in us and we in Him (*John 6:56-57; 15:5; I John 3:24; 4:13*).

David, again writes, such a beautiful hymn. “(*Psa 19:7-9*) The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.” Exceeding the righteousness of the Pharisees is a snap, because Christ did it for you! Believe! Rejoice and be glad in your victory. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.