

Exceedingly Good Righteousness

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In Matthew 5:20 we read that Jesus said; “*unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*” Jesus has just got going on the message we now call the sermon on the mount and he’s causing quite a stir among the people.

So far he has already challenged lots of mindsets about the Kingdom of God. He has said that His Kingdom is not about attainment. That His favour and blessing does not just flow on those who “deserve” it, but that He is a God whose love and favour flow into all men in all situations. He has taken those who from a human point of view are the most hopeless, and declares that the blessings of the Kingdom are theirs. He has then proclaimed that those same people are to be “*salt and light.*” He makes an astounding statement suggesting that these people before Him are salt and light. Not when they have made it or when they have attained some great measure of holiness, but right here, right now they are the best He has and they are told they are to be the salt and the light of the earth.

At this point the crowd are in a frenzy. Everything they are hearing is completely upside down to them (although really their thinking was upside down and Jesus was turning it right-side up!). Jesus has made clear that in the Kingdom, all are welcome, that everyone has the opportunity to be a part of it. The “everyday” people without any of the character or qualifications that humans insist is necessary to get on, they are the ones who are to be the salt and light. They are the ones to whom the Kingdom is available and the ones to whom the sharing of it is entrusted. The Law and the Prophets had been twisted around to authorize an oppressive, though religious, social order that put glittering humans – the rich, the educated, the well to do, the popular, the powerful and so on – in possession of God. Jesus’ proclamation dumps them out of their privileged position and raises ordinary people with no human qualifications into the place of relationship with God.

Is it any wonder then that after the beatitudes and the declarations about salt and light to the masses of “everyday” people assembled before Him that Jesus has to sound a note of caution? (Matt 5:17) His hearers knew that they had not just heard another list of powerless legalisms. They had just heard a Jewish rabbi turn the whole religious world order on its head!

Clearly he had to sound a warning because to his hearers it sounded like He had just got rid of the law! His hearers knew they fell short of the law (and the religious folk never let them forget it!) and yet they have just been told the Kingdom is theirs. They were puzzled! However the “law” they had in mind and lived with every day was not God’s law. It was a contemporary version of religious respectability, very harsh and oppressive in application, that Jesus called the “*righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees*.”

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God’s law is good and Jesus makes it very clear that every last little piece of it will remain. On two occasions Jesus commands those who enquire how to receive eternal life to keep the law (Mark 10:19; Luke 10:28). In both instances they left unhappy because the law they wanted to keep was a cut-down and distorted one that dominated their social setting. It was not the law of God. The law will remain and should be kept because the law is inherently good. It simply is the best way to live. The issue is not about the law but about how that law is kept. The scribes and Pharisees focused on the actions that the law required and made elaborate specifications of exactly what those actions were and how they should be done. But the inner dimensions of their personality, their hearts, were untouched by such actions and ultimately the heart will always triumph over conscious intentions. Acts can only be played for so long.

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Jesus makes the issue clear. (Matt 23:25-26, Luke 6:43-45) The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was all external. It was all for show and made no difference to them internally. The only way to be more righteous than a Pharisee is be righteous internally with a righteousness that comes from someone else. How else could you exceed the righteousness of the most outwardly righteous people on the face of the earth? If it is about my righteousness, then it is about me doing my best and keeping the rules that I might earn some righteousness. In this case Jesus isn’t bringing anything new. But He is bringing something new – He’s turning the religious world on its head!

The law is inherently good – it is God’s law. Hebrews 10:1-4 tells us that the law though had limitations. The law only dealt with the symptoms of our condition. The sacrifices that went with the law simply covered up the symptoms of our sinful nature for another year. The root of the issue is our sinful nature, our inherent desire to be independent towards God was never dealt with through the law.

Before I knew Jesus not only did I stand in my sins (the acts, words and thoughts that were contrary to God’s law) but deep in my inner being I was sin. Sin defined

me and was the source of who I was. The issue was not my sins but my sin. It was my sinful nature. It wasn't just the deeds, it was the root of those sinful deeds as well. The beauty and majesty of the new covenant is that both my sins and my sinful nature were taken when I said "Yes" to Jesus and my sinful nature was replaced with His Spirit. My sins (past, present and future) are forgiven and now I have His Spirit fully alive in me!

God now looks at me but He doesn't see my sinful nature – because it doesn't exist! In its place He sees the righteousness of His Son and always has done since the day I was born again and always will do until I go to be with Him in glory. It doesn't matter what I feel or what I do but about what has been done. Clearly we still sin, because in our minds we have been conditioned to think and act in certain ways that followed the sin nature, therefore our task now is to renew our mind. (Rom 12:1-2) But when we sin we have an advocate in heaven who pleads on our behalf as we confess our sin.

Where though does that leave us with regard to the law? In this wonderful new covenant I am no longer bound by the law. (Rom 13:8-10, Gal 5:14) Instead, when Jesus came and fulfilled the old covenant he initiated a higher law (James 2:8). All the law of the old covenant can be summed up in one word, "love". The reason we can be a part of this new covenant is because that "law", has been written on our hearts. The law that is written on our hearts is not rules and regulations, but is love. Jesus has written love on my heart. He has poured out his love into my heart (Rom 5:5). Therefore how do we live out this Christian life? Do we constantly strive to obey rules and regulations, to do this and to do that? If so, we are living as though we are under the old covenant and consciously or not, we undermine the value of what Jesus did for us on the cross at Calvary.

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He has won freedom and liberty (Gal 5:1,13) so that we might live a life where we can walk and enjoy everything He has to offer through the love He has placed in our hearts. We already have everything we need to walk in greater righteousness than the scribes and the Pharisees. In order to walk in it our task is to accept and believe the truth of what He has done and allow His love to flow through you more and more each and every day, renewing our mind. Enjoy walking in His exceedingly good righteousness!