

SELF-RIGHTEOUS PHARISEES

Thursday, February 5

Reading: Matthew 5:17-48

Matthew 5:20 *"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."*

The Pharisees and scribes (teachers of the law) were the self-proclaimed experts in the law of Moses. They had even added hundreds of their own rules in an attempt to 'build a fence around the law' so people would not break God's commandments. While they may have started with good intentions, over the years their rules became more important than their relationship with God. Instead of helping people follow God, they drove people away. Instead of God's Word bringing light and hope, they made it a chore and a burden. Their lives became a strict obedience to external rules instead of following God from the heart!

Jesus stresses the importance of the Law and the Prophets and clearly states that they will all be accomplished. But He says that to enter the kingdom of heaven, people must go beyond the scribes and Pharisees' legalistic adherence to rules and regulations. Later, Jesus would say:

"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach..." "Everything they do is done for people to see" (Matthew 23:2-3, 5)

Jesus gives examples of the religious leaders' misinterpreting or twisting the Scriptures ("You have heard it said") and then gets to the heart of Law ("but I say to you").

(1) MURDER – "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13) is dealing with more than simply an external act. Jesus relates it to our attitudes. To hate someone is equivalent to murder and Jesus pleads with us to deal with it swiftly before it escalates.

(2) ADULTERY – This too is more than simply the action of sex outside of marriage. The attitude of lust in your heart is also breaking this commandment. Jesus uses hyperbole to plead with us to take drastic measures to cut this attitude out of our minds and hearts.

(3) DIVORCE – The religious leaders taught that there were many acceptable reasons to divorce your wife. Jesus makes it clear that divorce was never God's plan and He lists only one accepted reason for it. (Read Matthew 19:3-12 for further discussion).

(4) OATHS – The religious leaders used oaths as evidence of their sincerity, whether they planned to keep their promise or not. Jesus said we should be so trustworthy that we have no need for oaths to prove our sincerity. Our word should be enough!

(5) REVENGE – An eye for an eye is still used as an excuse for revenge. It was originally a deterrent for excessive retaliation. But Jesus said His followers should be people of mercy, not revenge. Our first response should not be to "get them back" but to show the love and mercy of God.

(6) ENEMIES – The Jewish people hated their Roman overlords. Jesus said that we are to love and pray for those who hate us or treat us badly. It is easy to love those who love you. But to love those who abuse you emulates God's love for us.

Are you following a list of rules or are you listening to the Spirit's leading? The Holy Spirit helps us understand what God's Word says and how we should live, not some man-made rules.