

Matthew 5:33-48

- **Getting Our Bearings:**

- Isaiah 52⁷:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news [i.e., who proclaims the gospel], who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

- Matthew 3² [John the Baptist]: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
- Matthew 4¹⁷: From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
- Matthew 4²³:
And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.
- Matthew 5³: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Matthew 5¹⁰: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Matthew 6¹⁰: Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

- **Getting Our Context:**

-I suggested that Matthew 5³⁻¹⁶ described the citizens of God’s new kingdom in ‘whole person’ terms; Jesus’ beatitudes describe what people are and what these people do

-Jesus describes them individually (though almost certainly not exhaustively), but then describes them all together, as a whole, letting their (collective) light shine before people

-This people’s righteousness is the ‘whole person’ righteousness that the Law and the Prophets anticipated; in the actual doing, this righteousness goes beyond the Law’s

-To sharpen this point, Jesus uses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees as a foil

- Matthew 5²⁰: For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

-The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees has certain features that separate it--by a country mile!--from the righteousness that Jesus requires from his followers

-Jesus’ judgment pronouncement on the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 sheds some light on what, exactly, their righteousness consisted of; some excerpts:

- Matthew 23¹⁻⁷:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.”

- Matthew 23²³⁻²⁸:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! ²⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Q: So what, exactly, is Pharisaical hypocrisy?

-The answer is important because the gospels are not interested in providing us with a ‘history of religions’ survey of the Pharisee’s beliefs and practices in the abstract

-Jesus points to Pharisaical hypocrisy as one way to reinforce--by a negative example--the whole person righteousness that is to be characteristic of the people in his kingdom

-So Matthew 5²⁰: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”; so Matthew 6¹⁻⁶ below

-Stephen Westerholm may be helpful here:

In proclaiming to Israel the dawning reign of God, Jesus demanded a response quite different from that sought by the Pharisees, who summoned

the nation to adhere to Torah's laws as interpreted by Pharisaic scribes. Since both were competing for the allegiance of the masses, conflict and mutual attempts to discredit might seem inevitable. Any perceived departure from Torah on the part of Jesus or his disciples was liable to be attacked by Pharisees. Disputes arising from apparent violations of Sabbath laws are especially frequent in the Gospels. Pharisees can be counted on to cite Deuteronomy 24 against Jesus' (widely attested) condemnation of divorce (Mk 10:2-9). Again, Jesus' open association with (even at mealtimes) with notorious sinners could hardly have passed uncontested, providing as it did a stark contrast with Pharisaic efforts to cultivate careful adherence to laws and Pharisaic scruples about mealtime company. In each of these cases, the Pharisees appear in the Gospels appropriately enough as the party advocating precision ... in the interpretation of the Mosaic code. (DJG, 612)

- If the Pharisees were all about TORAH observance the Pharisaical way (which included the elders' traditions), then the fundamental question is What is true righteousness?
- The Pharisees were not, as popularly supposed, attempting to earn their way into heaven by their own works; this is an anachronistic way to read the gospels
- The Pharisees sought (echoing another Pharisee's words) "a righteousness under the law"
- If this is so, then Pharisaical hypocrisy is a matter of inadequate or just plain false righteousness (unrighteousness!); they are going about righteousness the wrong way!
- They can sever righteousness from the whole person which is at least imaginable when righteousness is determined by a fixed law that can be obeyed and observed
- So the Pharisees (in the gospels) are not Elmer Gantry hypocrites, that is, they know that their religion is a sham but use it to their own advantage by exploiting the yokels
- They may have genuinely believed that they were doing their best, under the law, to show God that they were righteous; nevertheless, they were divided between lips and heart
- 'Whole person' righteousness does not permit a division between the lips and the heart
- 'Whole person' righteousness is known, in part anyways, by being poor in spirit; it often accompanies the people who mourn or who hunger and thirst for righteousness ...
- This, I think, creates continuity between Matthew 5 and Matthew 6

[“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”]

Beware of practicing your righteousness [i.e., “Be careful not to do your righteousness ...”] before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ² Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

-Jesus’ *doing righteousness* may be likened to our *personal piety*, namely, those actions or practices that are expressions of our devotion and service to God

-I’m putting it this way to distinguish it from the righteousness represented in 5²¹⁻⁴⁸; the personal piety in Matthew is taken up with the Godward-life, our tradition’s *coram Deo*

-According to Jesus, in his kingdom, ‘doing righteousness’ is largely a private matter, it is practiced within the one-to-one relationship between a disciple and the heavenly Father

-Matthew 6¹ serves as a heading over--if not the whole chapter, then at least through 6¹⁸

-So, ‘doing righteousness’ in 6¹ includes ‘doing alms’ in 6²⁻³

Beware of practicing your righteousness [i.e., “Be careful not to **do** your righteousness ...”] before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ² Thus [οὕτως] ...

-Importantly--even if a bit difficult to understand and apply--this *coram Deo* life has its eye on a ... *reward* (*misthos* [μισθός]); μισθός occurs 6X in Matthew 5-6¹

-To our ears--and maybe to our theology--*reward* is hard to reconcile with devotion to God

-Yet it is a part of the comparison and contrast between the two forms of righteousness in the larger context, so we will have to incorporate into our study

¹ Matthew 5^{12, 46}; 6^{1, 2, 5, 16}.