

A Greater Righteousness

July 18, 2021

When I was in school one of the questions you had to figure out in each new class was, "How strict is the teacher?" Some teachers are very strict. Other teachers are less strict. If you want to get along with the teacher, and get a passing grade in the class, you need to know how strict the teacher is.

For example, you need answers to the following questions. Can I turn homework in late without penalty? Can I do extra credit? Can I repeat an assignment if I get a bad grade? Can I be a minute late for class? Can I skip class? How many classes can I skip? (Now, questions about skipping class are college questions, not high school questions.) These are all important questions to have answers to. How strict is this teacher?

Whenever a new roaming teacher showed up in the land of Israel in the first century, one of the crucial questions that had to be answered was, "How strict or literal does he interpret the Law of Moses?" There were a variety of different approaches to the law of Moses. Some groups tended to be pretty liberal in their application of God's commands. One such group was the Sadducees. At the other end of the spectrum were those who took a conservative, strict approach of applying God's commands. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were two such groups. And there were other groups that leaned one way or the other, but lay between these two.

So, when Jesus started his public teaching ministry, one of the questions everyone was asking about Jesus was, "How does He interpret the Law of Moses?" It was NOT automatically assumed that Jesus held to a strict interpretation of the Mosaic Law. The most strict group was the Pharisees. Jesus was not a Pharisee, had not been trained by the Pharisees, did not submit to the Pharisees, and at times purposely opposed them. So, some might assume Jesus was more like the Sadducees when it came to the Law of Moses. So, Jesus dealt with this question up front in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:17-19 (NIV) "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. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus comes down solidly on the strict conservative side of this issue. He makes it clear that He will not budge one letter from a literal reading of the commands of God.

As I said, one of the groups that took a similar stance on the Law of Moses was the Pharisees. No one in Israel took the Law of Moses more seriously than they did. In fact... **In previous generations, the Pharisees created a hedge around the law.**

A hedge is a row of bushes that grow up to form a boundary. Outside these windows of our sanctuary are holly bushes that don't form a hedge because there are spaces between them. But they do serve as a deterrent to break-ins because they are quite prickly to anyone trying to get in through one of those windows. If we had a solid row of them, along the border of our property, standing about 5 feet high, it would be more effective than a fence at keeping people out.

The Pharisees did not create a literal hedge of bushes. This hedge was a set of rules that, if kept, would keep anyone from breaking God's commands.

Think of the original law as a guardrail put up by God. As long as you stay on the road side of the guardrail, you will be safe. But you know what happens. People try sitting on the guardrail. Or they walk across the top of it, trying to stay balanced. And of course, some people end up on the dangerous side of the guardrail.

In 2011 a man died at a Texas Rangers baseball game. He fell over a guardrail, dropped 20 feet and landed on his head on the concrete below. If the stadium owners had removed the first row of seats and put a guardrail there, between the second of seats and the original guardrail, the man could not have fallen down more than a few feet and likely would not have died.

The Pharisees constructed a new guardrail, further away from the danger, one that would guard against anyone getting close to breaking God's original commands. And they pushed these new commands on everybody.

For example, the law said not to work on the Sabbath. It did not detail much of what was considered to be work. So the Pharisees made up rules about what was work and what wasn't. They made them very limiting in what was allowed on the Sabbath. Most normal chores were not allowed. Anything to do with business or farming, other than feeding your animals, was not allowed. Basically, anything that could wait until the next day was not allowed.

Let's pretend that walking two miles. in God's intent, was too far to walk on the Sabbath. The Pharisees decided you could only walk 1 mile. That way, even if you exceeded the mile a little bit, you wouldn't come close to breaking the command of God. That was the approach they took in this new set of rules. Over time, these rules became as important to them as God's actual commands. And they strictly enforced them on others.

No one was more zealous to obey the Mosaic Laws than the Pharisees. And no one sought to obey all these new rules and commands more than the Pharisees. In the minds of the average Jew the Pharisees were considered to be the most moral, righteous people of the day.

Jesus answered the main question about himself and the Mosaic Law. Then Jesus goes on to say something that, I am sure, just astounded them.

Matthew 5:20 (NIV) 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.

Jesus set an impossible standard for getting into the kingdom of heaven. He might as well have asked them to run a mile in one minute, or hit the bull's eye with a dart at 50 yards, bench press a ton. All of those things are impossible too. That is how many took this last statement.

So, what was wrong with the righteousness of the Pharisees?

The Pharisees believed they could be right with God through outward obedience alone.

The righteousness of the Pharisees was only outward obedience to the commands of God. They believed God only considered a person's actions, not his thoughts; outward behaviors, not internal desires. This is where their understanding of the Mosaic Law fell short.

Under the old covenant, righteousness with God was gained by love for God and faith in God expressed by obedience to God's commands.

The Pharisees only emphasized the last part, outward obedience to God's commands. They did not love God or entrust their lives to Him. They did not live by faith in God. Jesus often commented that they obeyed God outwardly, but their hearts were far from God. Look at the following quote by Jesus about them.

Matthew 23:27-28 (NIV) You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.
(Matthew 15:7-9; Luke 16:15)

In the verses that follow today's passage Jesus gives six examples of how the Pharisees misunderstood the commands of God. We will look at those in the weeks to come.

But this morning we must answer this question, "**Is it possible to have a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees?**" That is what Jesus said we need in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

It is possible to have such a righteousness, but it will not be a righteousness that we earn.

While we cannot produce a righteousness of our own good enough to deserve entry into the kingdom of heaven, we can receive a substitute righteousness.

Paul describes this in Romans 3.

Romans 3:21-22 (NIV) But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Romans 3:25 (NIV) God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.

Romans 3:28 (NIV) For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

The word justification is a courtroom term that means righteousness in this context. We receive righteousness by faith in Christ Jesus apart from obedience to the Mosaic Law. We receive Jesus' righteousness when we put our faith in his death for our sins.

You can add other things to verse 28, substituting them for the word law. We are justified by faith apart from going to church. We are justified by faith apart from reading the Bible. We are justified by faith apart from trying to be a good person. We are justified by faith apart from good deeds. We are justified by faith apart for our good character. We are justified by faith apart from your parent's faith. We are justified by faith apart from tithing. Anything you think earns you points with God... will not. Nothing but the blood of Jesus counts towards anyone's salvation.

The righteousness of Jesus is credited to us if we will accept it by faith.

Jesus alone had a righteousness greater than the Pharisees. Jesus was totally righteous. He fully loved God, fully trusted God, and fully obeyed God. This is how he fulfilled the law. This is the righteousness of Jesus. And by our faith in his death and resurrection God credits us with His righteousness.

This is our only hope of entering heaven.

This is the only way to heaven that God has provided.

This is the only plan for living a personal relationship with your creator.

So, today, believe in Jesus. Believe in his death and resurrection alone for your sins. Love Him. Entrust your life to him. And then obey him.