

**Matthew**  
**Every Stroke Inspired: Embracing Jesus' High View of Scripture (Part 5)**  
**Matthew 5:17-20**  
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*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher*  
*Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas*

Well, I invite you to turn with me to Matthew, chapter 5. Today, we'll finish the paragraph that is really at the core, the heart and soul, of this great sermon. Let's read it again together for the last time. We'll finish our study of it today, Matthew, chapter 5, and I'll read from verse 17 down through verse 20. This is really the main entry point of this sermon. The "Introduction" is what we have looked at so far. Here's the beginning of the heart of it, and this is what our Lord says, verse 17.

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

In this paragraph, Jesus teaches us that a true subject of His spiritual kingdom will always have a right relationship to the Scripture. Or to say it differently, "You can always spot a true Christian by how he or she responds to God's Word." Jesus here identifies three responses to Scripture that characterize every genuine believer. We've looked at two of them and finished our study of them. Let me just remind you of them. First of all, we must "Affirm Jesus' Relationship to Scripture," that's verse 17. That is, that "He Did Not Come to Abolish the Old Testament." "He Came to Fulfill It." And He fulfilled it by "Explaining It in His Teaching," by "Obeying It in His Life," and by "Embodying It in His Person," that is, its prophecies about the Messiah and its ceremonies and sacrifices were fulfilled in Him. So we must affirm that reality.

Secondly, we must "Adopt Jesus' View of Scripture," that's verse 18. Jesus believed, and if you're His disciple, you must believe in "Its Permanent Authority," "Its Verbal Inspiration," "Its Plenary Inspiration," "Its Complete Inerrancy," and "Its Careful Preservation," all of that in verse 18. If

you missed our study of that verse, go back and catch up if any of those expressions are unclear to you.

Now last week, we began studying verses 19 and 20. And in these last two verses in this paragraph, we learned that there is a third response toward the Scripture that characterizes all true believers. We must “Apply Jesus' Diagnosis with Scripture,” because in these verses, Jesus does diagnose the spiritual condition of three groups or categories of people. And in each case, He uses one simple tool to diagnose their true spiritual condition, and that is their relationship to the Scripture.

The first category of those who had attached themselves to Him is “The Dishonorable Disciple,” that's the first category, the dishonorable disciple. It's the first half of verse 19, “Whoever then annuls (that is, minimizes, downplays, or disregards) one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, (he) shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” This is the dishonorable disciple. If we downplay or minimize even the least significant portion of Scripture without Jesus' explicit authorization in the New Testament, then He will call us ‘least’ in His future kingdom. Now don't misunderstand. There are not going to be two groups in eternity, those who are honored and those who sort of live in the slums of heaven. That's not the idea here. I think it's possible this censure of their treatment of Scripture will take place at the Judgment Seat of Christ when believers are judged. He will say, “You don't deserve honor because of how you treated My Word.”

A second category of those attached to Jesus is “The Honorable Disciple.” The first half of verse 19 is the dishonorable disciple, the one not deserving of Christ's honor. Here is the honorable, the second half of verse 19, “but whoever keeps (literally does or obeys) and teaches (even the least commandment in the Scripture) *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus says “If you honor the Scripture, even its insignificant parts in your own life and with others under your influence, then Jesus will honor you in His future kingdom.” I think that also is likely to happen at the judgment seat of Christ when Christ honors those who have treated His Word carefully and with respect. Now, Jesus uses their response to Scripture to diagnose one last category of those who would attach themselves to Him, and that's where we come today.

This third category is “The False Disciple,” the false disciple. That's verse 20. Now, you'll notice in verse 20 that Jesus is not speaking to the scribes and Pharisees; He's not even really speaking

about them, they merely serve as a teaching point. Look at verse 20, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus actually addresses verse 20 to those who have attached themselves to Him. Now, remember who was there the day that He preached this sermon. When we started looking at this sermon, I reminded you of that. First of all, there were the Twelve Apostles, those He had just appointed earlier that day to serve as His Apostles. Secondly, there were others who claimed to be His disciples. In addition, there was a large crowd there that day who had, for various reasons, attached themselves to Jesus. Now, in verse 19, Jesus described two groups who belong to His spiritual kingdom and who would enter His future physical kingdom. Some deserving His honor because of how they treat the Scripture, others not deserving of His honor because of how they mistreat the Scripture.

But in verse 20, Jesus addresses a third group, and He tells them that they will not enter His future kingdom. Now that's remarkable when you think about it because everyone there that day, listening to Him, had shown some level of genuine spiritual interest. You'll remember some had traveled great distances to hear Jesus teach. Many in the crowd had already experienced miraculous healing from Jesus earlier that day. And even the statement in verse 20 implies that they desired to be in His future kingdom, they wanted to be there. In other words, the people, He's talking to in verse 20, wanted to be in heaven when they died, and they wanted to inherit, eventually, the future new earth. They had a desire for that. But despite their genuine interest, despite their willingness to listen to Jesus' teaching, and even despite their claim to be His followers, Jesus says, in verse 20, that some were not His true disciples. You see in verse 20, Jesus is diagnosing the person who claims a relationship with Him, but who proves, in the end, not to be a Christian at all. In other words, verse 20 is aimed at people sitting in churches like ours this morning who say, “I know Jesus,” but in fact, they don't. They believe they have a relationship with Jesus, but they don't have a saving relationship at all. So, let's examine then this verse.

This becomes crucial for us to understand who is in this group. Look again at verse 20, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Now notice, it begins with the word ‘for.’ That shows that it's connected to what has come before. Jesus is still dealing with the same issue, how someone responds to the Scripture reveals His spiritual condition. And in verse 20, Jesus says, your

response to Scripture will show whether or not you belong to His kingdom at all. Again, notice He introduces this statement with *gravitas*, “for” literally, “I am saying to you.” What follows is a solemn announcement, declaration by our Lord.

Now, let's take verse 20 apart grammatically. You'll notice that in our English text, He begins with a dependent clause, “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees.” And then He follows that with an independent clause, “you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” And it's that independent clause that comes second that is really the heart of Jesus' statement. So let's start with that, and then we'll go back and look at the dependent clause in a moment. Notice that independent clause, “...you will not enter the kingdom of heaven,” points out the professing disciples' “True Spiritual Condition.” “...you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Now the word ‘you’ is plural here in the Greek text. It was addressed to those who were listening that day and those who would read and study it in the future. Jesus says, in verse 20, that some attached to Him then and now, notice what He says, “will not.” Stop there for a moment. In Greek, if you wanted to emphasize the certainty of something, you could do what you can't do in English—you used a double negative, which is exactly what Jesus does here. He said, “for some hearing or reading these words of mine, there is absolutely no way that you will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Now, as I noted for you last time, so far in this sermon, Jesus has used the kingdom to refer to His current spiritual kingdom. What is Jesus' current spiritual kingdom? It's the kingdom of hearts, the kingdom of people over whom He rules. It includes all of those who've acknowledged His right to rule, who've repented of their sins, who have believed in Him, over whose hearts He reigns today as Lord. That's His current spiritual kingdom. But here, in verses 19 and 20, Jesus speaks of His future physical kingdom when He physically reigns upon the earth. And He says, “These people are not going to be in that future kingdom.” Now, don't misunderstand, both aspects of the kingdom are intimately related and ultimately can't be separated. Because, to enter Jesus' future physical kingdom, you have to belong to His spiritual kingdom in this life. You must have repented of your sins and acknowledged Jesus as Savior and Lord, acknowledged His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His resurrection as your only hope of being right with Him, to have put your faith in Him as Savior and Lord. And the genuineness of that faith is shown by the fact that you live under His authority as Lord every day. You acknowledge His right to direct what

you think and what you say and how you act in your home and what you do at work and what you do at school. So let me summarize then the main clause, the independent clause in verse 20. Jesus says this, “Some, who have attached themselves to Him, don't belong to His spiritual kingdom now and, therefore, will not enter His physical kingdom in the future,” (Paraphrase). That is the false disciple's true spiritual condition. In other words, there are people who claim to know Jesus who aren't in His kingdom now and won't be then. The question is, “Why? Why is this person a false disciple? What keeps him from being genuine?”

Well, notice secondly, “His Flawed Righteousness,” his flawed righteousness. Here's the issue. Verse 20 says, “...you will not enter the kingdom of heaven,” there's the independent clause, the main clause; and here's the dependent clause, “unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees.” Now obviously, this is absolutely crucial because Jesus says you're not in His kingdom now, and you're not getting into His future kingdom unless you meet the exception of this statement. Jesus says that to enter His kingdom, our righteousness must surpass that of a group He calls the scribes and Pharisees. Now we've met the scribes before in our study of Matthew, but this is the first time in Matthew's Gospel where these two words come together, the scribes and Pharisees. So let's make sure we know who these guys are.

The scribes were the official caretakers of the Hebrew Scriptures. They were the ones who made sure that the scrolls of the Scripture were carefully copied, were stored, were protected, and were preserved for the next generation. The scribes spent their lives studying the Scripture, and so they were its most respected interpreters and teachers. The scribes were experts in the Hebrew Scripture, what we call the Old Testament. In fact, if you were a scribe, it meant that was your vocation, that was your career, that is what you did for a living, you were a scribe. But the term Pharisees doesn't describe a profession or a vocation, but rather a theological position. In fact, most of the scribes were also Pharisees, that's their theological position. But most Pharisees were not scribes; there were a whole lot more Pharisees in Israel in the first century than there were scribes. In fact, some estimate there may have been as many as 6,000 of them, and most of the Pharisees were laymen. They had other jobs, or in many cases, they were independently wealthy and didn't have to work, so they were laymen. The Pharisees, whether they were scribes or whether they were laymen, they were the theological conservatives of their day.

Now, we come to this group with a lot of bias. I mean, since we've grown up hearing Jesus' assessment of these guys, we don't think much of them or of their righteousness. So Jesus' statement here doesn't really surprise us; we expect it. But if you had been there, hearing Jesus preach the sermon that day, you would have been shocked by this statement. Because the scribes and Pharisees were thought to be the most holy, spiritual people alive. In fact, the Jews had a saying, "If only two people go to heaven, one will be a scribe and the other a Pharisee." But here, shockingly, Jesus says publicly that most scribes and Pharisees would not enter His future kingdom. They weren't getting into heaven or His eternal reign. Turn to Matthew 23, keep your finger in this text, by the way, because we'll come back here a couple of times. Matthew 23, this is Jesus' sermon during the Passion Week against the scribes and Pharisees. Notice what He says about them in Matthew 23:13, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in." In other words, "You're not getting into heaven, and the people you're teaching aren't getting in either, because by your bad teaching, you're shutting the door for them." Wow! Look at verse 15, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte (to convert a Gentile to Judaism); and when he becomes one (like you are, your misunderstanding of the Old Testament), you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." That's pretty clear—"You're not going to heaven; you're a son of hell."

Now, again, keep your finger there, but turn back to our text in chapter 5. Jesus, in verse 20, doesn't say that the scribes and Pharisees aren't getting in, although clearly, they aren't, that's what we just saw in chapter 23, but instead, he says, "We aren't getting in unless our righteousness surpasses theirs." Our righteousness must be greater than theirs in extent and kind, in breadth and depth. Wow! So what was the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? If you had seen a scribe or Pharisee in the first century, you would have witnessed a remarkable display of righteousness. Now let me just describe them according to the New Testament. This is how the New Testament describes them. They loved the Scriptures; they read and studied it every day. In fact, we know from history, they memorized large portions, usually the first five books of the Old Testament, and in some cases, a greater portion of the Old Testament. They prayed often and for long periods of time, chapter 23 says. Many of them fasted two days a week, according to Luke 18. They gave a tenth of everything that they owned to God, including their garden herbs, chapter 23. They were

careful to observe all the ceremonies and traditions attached to their faith, like washing their hands before every meal and washing pitchers and cups before using them, Mark 7. They led exemplary moral lives. According to Luke 18, you never witnessed a Pharisee taking God's name in vain. They never failed to keep the Sabbath. They never stole. They never committed adultery with someone other than their spouse. Outside, externally, they were righteous, they were morally upright, they were faithful evangelists, constantly trying to convince Gentiles to worship the one true God, as we just saw in chapter 23. They fastidiously tried to keep all 613 commands that they had counted in the Old Testament Law. According to Acts 23, they even lived in anticipation of the future resurrection.

You see, by every external standard, these guys appeared truly righteous. Isn't that what Paul said of himself? Paul the Pharisee, in Philippians 3:6 said, when I was a Pharisee, "...as to the righteousness which is in the Law, (I was) found blameless." "You can look at my life, and you didn't see any obvious flaw." You see, if you had lived in the first century, you would have thought they were the most righteous people on earth.

Now, turn back with me to Matthew 5, verse 20, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Greek word translated, 'surpasses,' literally means 'to have something in abundance.' It was used in secular Greek for a river that overflowed its banks. Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness 'overflows' or 'far surpasses' that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Now, if you're thinking with me this morning, that leads you to an important question, and that is, "What was so terribly wrong with the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees?"

Well, in the Gospels, we learn from Jesus that their righteousness was fatally flawed in two ways. And here's the point. Here is Jesus' point in verse 20, their righteousness was flawed in exactly the same ways as a false disciple of His. So the point, in verse 20, isn't the scribes and Pharisees, it's that their flawed righteousness also marked those who claimed to know Him but didn't really. So, what is "The Flawed Righteousness" of a false disciple of Jesus?

Number one, just like the scribes and Pharisees, "His hope of heaven is fatally misplaced," his hope of heaven is fatally misplaced. You see, according to Paul, the Old Testament Law served two purposes: Galatians 3, it served to show people their sin, to show them their lack of

righteousness. The Ten Commandments aren't there to show you what a wonderful person you are; they are there to show you how bad you are. And according to Galatians 3, the Law also was to drive them to their Messiah, a tutor, to point us to Christ as our only hope of being right with God. That's what the Law was there to do. Tragically, the scribes and Pharisees failed to understand any of that. They thought they could keep God's Law, and by keeping it, gain a right standing before God by their own efforts. Turn over to Luke; Luke, chapter 16, and verse 14, "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him (Jesus)." And here's what Jesus says about them in verse 15, "And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts.'" How did they justify themselves?

Turn over to Luke 18 and verse 9; this is about them as well, "He also told this parable (Here's how He describes them.) to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt." It's like the Jews that Paul addresses in Romans, chapter 10, verse 3, he says they missed "God's righteousness (they didn't understand it, and instead) and seeking (they sought) to establish their own (righteousness)." Beloved, you cannot get into Jesus' kingdom by your righteousness. You're not into His spiritual kingdom because of your righteousness, and you're not getting into His eternal kingdom because of your righteousness. Why? Because you don't have any, and neither do I. Romans 3:10, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE." And I'm not the exception to that, and you're not the exception to that. You only get in if God credits Jesus' righteousness to you. Listen to Philippians 3:9, Paul says, I want to "be found in Him (Jesus), not having a righteousness of my own derived from obeying God's Law, (but) the righteousness which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes as a gift from God on the basis of faith," (Paraphrase). You see, one way to recognize a false disciple is that, just like the scribes and Pharisees, "His hope of heaven is fatally misplaced." His hope of heaven is in his own righteousness; he rests in self-righteousness. If you're here this morning, and you think you're getting into heaven because of something you are or something you've done, you are a false disciple of Jesus Christ. Your hope is in the wrong place.

But that's not Jesus' main point, back in our text in Matthew 5; His main point here, in context, He's referring to a second way that a false disciple's righteousness, like that of the scribes and Pharisees, is flawed and it's this. "His obedience to Scripture is fatally inadequate," his obedience

to Scripture is fatally inadequate. You see, that's what was true of the scribes and Pharisees. Their obedience to the Scripture was imperfect in several ways. Again, the same ways, and this is Jesus' point, as a false disciple of His. So what does this inadequate obedience to Scripture look like? It was true of the scribes and Pharisees; it is true of a false disciple of Jesus.

Number one, "It is external, not internal," it is external, not internal. The scribes and Pharisees defined obedience as external conformity rather than internal obedience from the heart. Jesus diagnoses this in Mark 7, verse 6, when He said, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:" listen to this, "THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS." Wow! What they say is great! "BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME." Now, turn with me again to chapter 23, Matthew 23, seven times in this chapter, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees 'hypocrites.' As you know, the Greek word originally described someone in Greek theater, someone who put on a mask in order to play a role. It later, by New Testament times, came to refer to anyone who pretended to be what they really weren't. Jesus said that the scribes and Pharisees were playing a part outwardly, but it wasn't really who they were. Look at verse 25:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish (You're all into what you look like, into the external.), but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

In other words, "Don't just worry about the external, start with the internal, where's your heart?" Verse 27, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you're like whitewashed tombs." Here's another illustration, they would paint tombs white, both to adorn them, but also to keep people from stepping on them and becoming unclean. Sometimes they were really beautiful. He says, "You are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside (you) appear beautiful, but inside they are (you're) full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." So what were they inside? Verse 33, a bunch of "serpents (snakes), you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" You see, God never looks merely at the external. He always looks at the heart.

Right now, as I think I've told you, I'm going back through the Gospels just for my own study, looking at Christ. I'm going through a harmony of the Gospels. This last week, I was in the text,

and it just jumped out at me where it says, “Jesus knew their hearts.” Friends, that is still true. Jesus knows exactly what goes on between your ears. He knows every thought you have ever had, and He doesn't assess you based on how you look to others; He assesses you by who you really are inside, who you are in your heart. 1 Samuel 16:7, “God *sees* not as a man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” If obedience to Scripture doesn't start in your heart, then it's not real obedience, and it's not real righteousness; you're just like the scribes and Pharisees.

Now, a false disciple's obedience is flawed, not only because it's external and not internal, but secondly, because “It's for his glory, not God's glory.” The scribes and Pharisees obeyed primarily for selfish reasons. It's very clear in the New Testament. Again, if you're still in chapter 23, look at verse 5. Jesus says, “they do (Notice the word.) all their deeds (Why?) to be noticed by men.” Why do they want to be noticed by men? Chapter 6, verse 2 says they wanted to be, “honored” literally, the Greek word is “glorified by men.” They didn't want God's glory; they wanted their own glory! This is a sobering reminder, folks. If you obey God because of something you get out of it, if you obey God because you believe if you do so, God is going to give you health, or He's going to give you wealth, or you do it so you'll be respected by the people in this church, or if there's any reason other than God that you obey God, then it's not obedience at all.

Thirdly, a false disciple's obedience, like that of the scribes and Pharisees, is flawed because “It's incomplete, not radical,” it's incomplete, not radical. You see, the false disciple's kind of obedience is just like that of the scribes and Pharisees, and the New Testament describes their incomplete obedience. So let me just tell you that here's how the scribes and Pharisees failed to obey completely, and the same thing is true for false disciples of Jesus. First of all, the false disciple obeys easier, less important commands, but neglects the important. In other words, it's not that they don't do anything God says, they do, but somehow, they miss the big points. Look at Matthew 23, verse 23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe (your) mint and dill and cumin.” In other words, you pay taxes and give for the temple's prosperity out of even your own garden herbs, and yet, “you have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” You see, false disciples are all caught up in the unimportant and they forget

the big things, like loving God with all their hearts and loving the people around them as themselves.

A false disciple, secondly, his obedience is incomplete, not radical, because he undermines Scripture by emphasizing his own ideas. False disciples invariably add a mix of all of their own ideas into what constitutes their Christianity. It's what the scribes and Pharisees did, right? In their case, Matthew 15, it was their traditions, their extra-biblical traditions. False disciples invariably get all caught up in something that's important to them that isn't even in the Bible.

And thirdly, false disciples interpret and apply Scripture in a way that misses its primary intent. That's really the main point in our text, because in the rest of Matthew 5, Jesus gives six examples of how the scribes and Pharisees' misinterpretation of Scripture had distorted its meaning, and they had missed God's primary intention. Look at Matthew 5, verse 21, here's example number one, "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'" It wasn't the Law of God, by the way, it was their false interpretation that was the problem. We'll see that as we get into it even next week. "But I say to you," there's example number one. Example number two, verse 27, "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,'" and we're going to get into how they interpreted it, "but I say to you," and there are four more examples. There are six of them in this chapter. You see, false disciples invariably emphasize the Scripture in a way that misses its main point. So the scribes and Pharisees congratulated themselves that they hadn't murdered anybody, but they were perfectly content to be angry and to express that anger. They congratulated themselves on the fact that they hadn't physically committed adultery with anyone, but they were content with the lust in their hearts after those who were not their spouse. A false disciple's obedience is always incomplete, but what Jesus wants is radical obedience. Look down at verse 48, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." That's the standard. The righteousness of a false disciple, like that of the scribes and Pharisees, is defective and inadequate because "It's external, not internal;" "It's for his or her own glory, not God's glory," and "It is incomplete, not radical."

But what does flawed righteousness have to do with not entering Jesus' kingdom? Was Jesus saying that we enter His kingdom by our works? Absolutely not, because remember, the other

problem with the scribes' and Pharisees' righteousness was that it was self-righteousness. So what is Jesus' main point here? To get into His kingdom, your righteousness must “be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees.” In other words, it has to be true righteousness. That's what He's saying. It has to be true righteousness. But how does that happen? How does anyone get true righteousness? And how does this false disciple get a righteousness that's internal, radical, and motivated solely for God's glory? How does that happen?

Well, let's consider “The Biblical Remedy.” Here's how you become truly righteous. According to Jesus, in the Gospels, true righteousness comes from two acts of God. This is the only way anyone's truly righteous, two acts of God. Act number one is “Regeneration—a changed heart within.” You see, before we can be truly righteous, God must first change our hearts through the miracle that Jesus calls “the new birth.” John, chapter 3, verse 3, “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again (or born from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” The only way that you or I will ever be righteous is that if we experience what Jesus calls “the new birth.” God changes our hearts from within. And when God changes the heart in regeneration, He gives us a new delight in God's Word and a new power to obey God's Word. That's exactly what Ezekiel says in Ezekiel 36:26. God says, “I will give you a new heart...(verse 27) and I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.” You see; to be righteous, God has to first change your heart in the miracle of the new birth. There are a lot of people sitting in churches like ours, and maybe some here this morning, who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, but they have the same dead heart they were born with. They've never experienced the new birth. God has never given them a new love for Him and love for others and a delight in His Word and a new power to obey it.

But there's also a second divine act required to be righteous. Not only regeneration, but “Justification—a changed standing with God.” Turn with me to Luke, chapter 18, you're familiar with this story Jesus tells. Luke 18, and verse 9:

And He (Jesus) also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt. “Two men went up to the temple to pray (This would have been at the time of the sacrifices, either morning or afternoon.), one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (One thought to be perfectly righteous and holy, the

other the worst in their culture.) The Pharisee (Jesus says.) stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I'm not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ (Notice what he's doing, go back to verse 9, He is “trusting in himself that he's righteous.” This is his hope of heaven. God's going to receive him because of how good he is. Verse 13.) But the tax collector (Here's the other guy.), standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ (Now, watch Jesus' diagnosis of these two responses—one is championing his own righteousness; the other is acknowledging he has none. Verse 14.) I tell you, this (second) man (the tax collector) went to his house justified (He left, and in a moment's time, he was declared right with God.) rather than the other.

That's what we need to be righteous, to be justified. We need to be declared right, our standing before God changed by a judicial decision of God. How does that happen? How do you get a changed heart? If you're here this morning, you say, “Wow, I am a false disciple. I see that in the Scripture. I see myself in the mirror of Scripture. How do I get a changed heart? How do I get a changed standing before God?” Jesus' answer is right there at the end of verse 13, “You humble yourself before God, and you cry out to God, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner,’” (Paraphrase). That “be merciful” is an interesting word in the original language. It literally means, “God, be propitiated to me, a sinner.” Remember, he's praying; it's the time of the sacrifice at the temple. So an animal's being killed next to him, and he says, “God,” literally, he says, “God, let the death of that substitute satisfy your wrath against my sin. Forgive me and make me right with you by the death of the substitute.” That's how you can be right with God. Not an animal, that animal pointed forward to the Lamb of God we sang about earlier.

So don't miss this. Only two acts of God, the two acts of “Regeneration” and “Justification” make real righteousness possible. And those two acts of God, “a changed heart” and “a changed standing before God,” are always followed by “Sanctification—a genuine desire for and pursuit of obedience to God's Word.” Now, not imperfect, but radical, not external, but internal, and not for my own glory, but for God's glory. John Stott writes:

It is this deep obedience which is a righteousness of the heart and is possible only in those whom the Holy Spirit has regenerated and now indwells. This is why entry into God's kingdom is impossible without a righteousness greater than the Pharisees. It's because such a righteousness is evidence of the new birth, and no one enters the kingdom without being born again.

So let me ask you this morning, "What kind of righteousness characterizes you? Is it from the heart, radical, for God's glory?" Then if so, Jesus says, "You've experienced the new birth and your righteousness does surpass that of the Scribes and Pharisees." Your response to the Scripture indicates that you belong to His spiritual kingdom today, and you will someday belong to His physical future kingdom. But is your righteousness mere external conformity? Is it incomplete like that of the Scribes and Pharisees? Is it driven by your self-interest? If so, then your righteousness is just like that of the Scribes and Pharisees, and that means you are not in Jesus' spiritual kingdom today, regardless of what you claim, and unless you are fundamentally changed by God at the heart level, you will never enter His future physical kingdom.

But here's the good news. This is the Gospel. You can have a changed heart and a changed standing of righteous before God today, right now, while you're sitting there in your seat if you are willing to repent of your sins, to abandon your self-righteousness, any hope in yourself, and like the tax collector in Jesus' story, to cry out humbly to God, "God, be propitiated to me, the sinner. Let the death of the Substitute, Your Son, purchase my forgiveness. Make me right with you." If you'll do that today, God will receive you. He never turns away a contrite heart. That's my prayer for you, even this morning.

Let's pray together. Father, thank You for this powerful passage. Lord, for those of us who look in this verse and realize that, by Your grace, You have changed our hearts, You have given us a right standing with You, and our obedience, while not perfect, is increasing and growing and is real and is from the heart. Lord, encourage us, give us hope in our future, help us to continue to trust in Christ, to continue to grow in our obedience.

But Father, for those here this morning who claim to know Jesus, but who have to admit that their righteousness looks a whole lot more like the scribes and Pharisees than it does a true disciple, Lord, I pray that You would produce in them even today true repentance and faith. May they cry

out like the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.” Thank You that You're a gracious God who never turns away such a heartfelt cry. We thank You and praise You in Jesus' name. Amen.