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The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
9 February 2014
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Isa 58:3-9a; Mt 5:13-20

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

*“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:20)*

Does that scare you?
Have you slowed down to think about what that means?

We’re so used to bad-mouthing the Pharisees that we can hardly consider them righteous.
When we hear “Pharisee” we think:

*hypocrite,
white-washed tomb,
and there’s another one—a far cruder way of putting it—
someone thinking he has odorless excrement.*

Pharisees are the chief of sinners in our book.
If you set a Pharisee and a Tax-collector side by side, we’d choose the tax-collector any day!
Heck, we’d even take the prostitute,
or Barabbas,
or the woman who’s had 5 husbands, and the guy she’s with isn’t one of them!
Any of them over a Pharisee every day.

But we forget that the Pharisee is the one who holds to God’s word.
The Pharisee keeps every jot and tittle, not a single iota of the Law goes missing—
and he’ll let you know if you’ve let one slide.
The Pharisee not only *teaches* according to the letter of the law,
but that’s the way he *lives*, too.
Everything is done just right—all according to the book.

While we pick and choose which parts of the Scripture we like,
the Pharisee keeps them all and to a T.

He’d resonate well with the words from today’s Gospel:
*“For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will
pass from the Law until all is accomplished.
Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”*
(5:18-19)

The Pharisee says, “Amen!”
And if we’re honest with ourselves, we say “Ah, man.”

If we just did everything that the Lord commands, and teach others to do the same.

That's all it takes to be called “great” in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But if you fail at just one of the least of His words;
and if you teach others—accidentally, or on purpose—
then you’ll be called “least” in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now before we move on, we’ve got to clarify one thing here.
To be called “great” or to be called “least” in the Kingdom of Heaven
isn’t speaking about levels or ranks or degrees in heaven.

It’s not about one being higher or lower than another.
It’s a matter of whether you’re in or out.
To be called “least” is to be declared condemned, judged, cast into the outer pits:
*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*

And to be called “great” is to be declared holy, a citizen, a son of the Kingdom.

So obviously, when we hear of these two ways—up or down, in or out—
we wonder whether we’ve qualified; or where we are.

The answer is quite simple:
have you kept every single command of the Lord—every jot and tittle—
and taught others to do likewise?

And here is where we part ways with the Pharisee.
The Pharisee says, “Yes.”
We say, “Lord, have mercy!”

If it all depends on us, we’ll be cast out, thrown to the pits of hell, called *least* by the Kingdom.
But Jesus says,
*“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.” (5:17)*

He does literally everything.
While the Pharisee tries as hard as he can to show that he’s kept the letter of the law—
he has not and cannot.

One of these commands of our Lord—a bit later in this same Sermon on the Mount—is:
“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (5:48)

Every action every thought every desire every aspect of your life must be perfect.
And so it is for Christ.

It’s not that any of these commands is brushed aside, or no longer useful or true—
it’s that literally everything is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus.

Jesus, who is the light of the world, the sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins,
has fulfilled the Scriptures *for you*.

But again, fulfilling them doesn't mean abolishing them.
They're not taken away so that you can live however you want.
They're fulfilled so that you could walk in them.
In Christ, the Scriptures are now *your* story!
And you are given to live in such a way that reflects this story, because you live in Christ.

This brings us to the salt and light bit.

Christ says,

*“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (5:16)*

By looking at you—

at your life, at your conduct, at the way you treat your spouse, and your children,
and the words you use at work, or on Facebook, or when the doors are closed—
by looking at *you*, the world is to give glory to God.

That means your works matter.

Your life is a testimony, a witness to Christ.

Not in the way of the Pharisees—

who need to cover up and conceal all the ways they've set aside parts of the law—
but as a Christian, who depends entirely on Christ fulfilling the Scripture for us.

In that way—in humility, repentance, in admitting your sin and begging others for forgiveness—
you actually show the mercy of God in Christ.

By your repentant life you proclaim the One who has kept all of this for you.

That is light to a world that thinks it needs to cover itself when it fails.

That sort of life is also salt, that preserves the world with the forgiveness of sins.

In your life and your speech, you participate in the work of Christ.

Through you He brings His forgiveness.

Through you He draws all men to Himself.

For He says,

“You are the salt of the earth.” (5:13)

“You are the light of the world.” (5:14)

Your righteousness is from Christ and in Christ,
and far exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.

You have entered heaven already.

And you are great in the Kingdom of Heaven,
for you have been called into Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit