

# The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

## Chapter 14: Christians as Doers and Teachers of the Law

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Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:19-20).

After our Lord assures His audience that He did not come to destroy the law and the prophets but rather fulfill, He turns His attention to His disciples' treatment of God's law. The word "therefore" indicates that Jesus is now applying His previous doctrine about the continuing validity of the law to the teaching and behavior of His followers. The fact that Christ did not come to abolish the law means that all Christians have a duty to teach obedience to the whole moral law of God and to obey all of its precepts, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. By way of introduction, there are a number of things to note regarding our text.

First, this verse (together with verse 20) forms an introduction to the following section where the Savior gives example after example of how the scribes and Pharisees had not truly taught or obeyed God's law. Our Lord warns His disciples that they must steer clear of the popular teachers in their own day and instead follow the true meaning of the Torah given by Himself.

Second, the word "commandments" (*entolon*) in this context is restricted to the moral commandments of God. This observation is inferred from the fact that: a) Christ's statement is inclusive of the new covenantal era that He is about to introduce. The Redeemer discusses both teaching and *doing* after the cross; Christians are not to keep the ceremonial laws. b) This statement introduces a very lengthy section (5:21-48) where only the proper interpretation of moral commandments is entertained.

Third, the Savior's statement in verse 19 about doing and teaching the whole moral law is a prelude to our Lord's statement in verse 20 regarding the necessity of a disciple's personal righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees. "Instead of encouraging his followers to disregard the law of Moses, our Lord insists on the most scrupulous adherence to it...instead of requiring less from his disciples than the Scribes and Pharisees...our Lord requires more."<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, Christ does not contrast two extreme positions (i.e. a complete rejection of what is required in the moral law or the full acceptance of them), but rather only the setting aside of one of the least requirements of the law. Therefore, in this verse the Redeemer is not contrasting the rank unbeliever or antinomian with the mature Christian, but is contrasting the mistaken disciple with one who holds the correct position. This verse is concerned only with citizens of the kingdom of heaven. There are a number of things that merit our attention in verse 19.

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<sup>1</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:174.

(1) Jesus first discusses the consequences of disregarding the least commandments and teaching men that they do not need to be obeyed. “Whoever...breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” The word translated “break” (*luse*) means to dissolve, destroy or annul. It is the simple verb of which a compound verb (*katalusai*) occurs twice in verse 17. Here it is translated “break” because it is set in parallel to doing the least commandments in the second half of the verse 17. The idea here is that of a disciple who does not believe he is obligated to follow a commandment which he considers unimportant and, therefore, breaks this commandment. He then passes on his unbiblical viewpoint to others in the church.

The first half of verse nineteen raises a number of important questions. First, what does our Lord mean by the expression “the least of these commandments”? The phrase “least of these commandments” must be taken in an objective, not a subjective sense. In other words, our Lord is not saying “what you may happen to think is the least requirement,” but is speaking of an actual least requirement of the moral law. The idea that is common in some circles that every requirement is of equal importance is refuted by Jesus’ statement. Some requirements are supreme and absolutely essential. Others are important, yet secondary. Still others could be said to be of lesser weight. Finally there is the least commandment. Some rabbis regarded Deuteronomy 22:6-7 (“If a bird’s nest happens to be before you along the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, with the mother sitting on the young or the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young; you shall surely let the mother go; and take the young for yourself, that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your day.”) as the “lightest” or least important of all the commandments. Christ, at a later point, would even rebuke the scribes and Pharisees for neglecting the weightier matters of the law (Mt. 23:23). He also made it clear that the greatest of all the commandments was to love God with all the heart, soul and mind (Mt. 22:37). Therefore, even though all divine requirements are important; all moral laws form a grand unit; and the violation of even one law merits death and hell in God’s sight (Ez. 18:4; 1 Jn. 3:4), we must recognize degrees of law and degrees of sin.

Given the fact that we are discussing what is objectively the least requirement, the Savior is obviously not referring to one of the ten commandments. Although within the ten commandments themselves there are commands that are more weighty than others (e.g., worshiping a false God and taking the Lord’s name in vain are far more serious sins than coveting your neighbor’s ox), all of the ten commandments are very important and therefore could never (objectively) be a least commandment in the law. “Thus to vacate any of the ten commandments, is too bold a stroke for the jealous God to pass by. It is something more than transgressing the law, it is making void the law, Ps. cxix.126.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, although Christ never identifies a least requirement, we can surmise that it would be a much lighter law such as Deuteronomy 22:6-7. Our Lord’s statement is an implicit endorsement of the Puritan or Reformed concept of the Old Testament law that all the various moral case laws found within the judicial laws are still binding as to their general equity. It is simply inconceivable that the Redeemer who wrote the ten commandments into stone with His own finger would regard any of these commandments, which are foundational to all morality, as least in any way.

Second, what does Jesus mean when He says that such a person will be called least in the kingdom of heaven? The Savior is not specific regarding which person or persons are doing the calling. Some believe that our Lord is speaking about believers, in general, who are recognizing that such a person is least or that the church officers are making a judgment about such a person.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:56.

Others think that Christ Himself is the one giving this assessment, both in the present and the future at the final judgment. Still others think that it refers to the Lord and the church. However, given the church's abysmal record throughout history on God's law, it is with Christ's assessment that we primarily need to be concerned. It is the responsibility of all Christians not only to observe the law as interpreted by Jesus, but also to teach it faithfully to others. If laws that are light are not kept, then that Christian's status both in the present and with regard to his future reward in heaven will suffer.

What is particularly interesting regarding this verse is that it tells us very explicitly that there are behaviors and teachings that are bad and wrong which are not soul-destroying errors and do not lead to complete apostasy and hell. These deficient doers and teachers are demoted to least in the kingdom, but they are still in the kingdom of heaven. They are still genuine Christians. "Such an offender shall be justly designated *least*, not *the least*, in comparison with every other, but one of the least, belonging to the lowest class of those who are in any sense the subject of Messiah's reign."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, believers must be very careful when accusing other professing Christians of being damnable heretics or goats instead of sheep. Those who do not make any distinction between fundamental errors and less serious erroneous views, that while still wrong are not absolute rejections of crucial truths, are themselves guilty of error.

Another noteworthy thing about the Redeemer's statement is that it presupposes salvation by grace through faith alone. The Savior is essentially teaching that a disciple who out of ignorance holds a wrong opinion regarding lighter commandments in the law and thus breaks them and even shares his erroneous view with others is still a citizen of heaven. Therefore, this person obviously did not merit eternal life for himself. He is far from perfect in his thoughts, actions and words, but Jesus has forgiven him all of his sins and imputed to him His own perfect obedience to the law. This fact, of course, does not mean that Christ does not require real repentance from our old life of sin. He certainly does (Lk. 13:3, 5). It also does not mean that genuine Christians can disregard the ten commandments or lead lives of habitual, scandalous sin and be a true disciple. They obviously will not do such things. Therefore, the "least" are not scandalous, habitual, unrepentant sinners. "The 'least' has presumably been essentially faithful to the law, though not having reached or taught the ideal championed by Jesus."<sup>4</sup> This passage acknowledges that Christians are still imperfect and guilty of sins. John concurs, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn. 1:8). If anyone is tempted to interpret our Lord's statement in an antinomian manner, then he must ignore the next verse which renders such a view impossible.

(2) After Christ warns His disciples of the consequences of breaking a least commandment, He discusses the reward to those who faithfully regard all of the commandments. "[B]ut whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:19b). Greatness in Christ's kingdom belongs only to those who are faithful in doing and teaching the whole moral law. In the broader context of Scripture, this obviously does not refer to sinless perfection, but to those who faithfully follow our Lord's teaching in 5:17-18 and make the effort to apply it to their lives and teaching. "The peerage of his kingdom is ordered according to obedience. Not birth, knowledge, nor success will make a man great; but humble and precise obedience, both in word and deed."<sup>5</sup> The teaching of our Savior is completely at odds with this evil world. It also explicitly contradicts the doctrine regarding the law held by the vast

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 130.

<sup>4</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 109.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 53.

majority of evangelicals. Christ did not replace the Old Covenant moral law with a less stringent, milder law. He expects a careful obedience to the whole moral law and he requires His appointed teachers to set forth the same doctrine of the law that He did. There are a number of noteworthy things about this statement.

First, note that Jesus deliberately places doing before teaching. Our Lord expects His disciples to apply His teaching to their own lives and walk consistently with the Word before they teach others. A biblical application of the Savior's teaching to our own lives is a prerequisite for guiding others into the truth. That is why Paul told Timothy, "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:16). "Christ requires integrity of life and soundness of doctrine from His servants. The Lord is both mocked and grievously insulted by ministers who practice one thing and preach another: far better to quit preaching entirely if our lives be opposed to our sermons. Furthermore, there will be *no power* in the preaching of the man whose own walk clashes with his talk: his words will carry no conviction to the hearts of his hearers."<sup>6</sup> Jesus strongly condemned the scribes and Pharisees because they were teachers who "say, and do not do" (Mt. 23:3). If we are to be effective in reaching others with the message of the gospel, our lives must reflect the truth of the good news before we open our mouths as God's witnesses.

Second, verse 19 makes it very clear that there are different degrees of reward in heaven. Believers differ as to the degree of dedication and faithfulness to the Savior and His teachings on this earth. Consequently, there are different degrees of rewards received at the resurrection. We see this same teaching in 1 Corinthians where Paul describes the Redeemer's evaluation of all Christians' works of the day of judgment. "Now if anyone builds on this foundation [i.e. Jesus Christ] with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

Although we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, in God's plan, the works of a Christian, whether good or bad, have a role to play in one's status for eternity. This teaching should motivate us to a more diligent obedience and comfort us when we make sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom. This reward is not only meted out according to the degree of faithfulness in obedience, but also according to the correctness or orthodoxy of one's teaching. Therefore, believers must be diligent in learning Scripture and correct doctrine as well as humbly and sincerely submitting to biblical ethics. Both are required by the Savior. The attitude which is common today that correct living is important, while correct doctrine is inconsequential, is not condoned by our Lord at all.

Third, if those believers who only deny a least commandment are regarded as least by Jesus, then how does our Lord regard those who deny weightier commandments? This is a very sober question because most evangelicals believe that the obligation to keep one day out of seven holy to Jehovah has been abrogated. Even in Presbyterian denominations that are regarded as very conservative, Sabbath observance is generally not required, nor is breaking the Sabbath a matter of discipline. Often when confessional members of Presbytery ask probing questions of a candidate for the ministry about his views and practice regarding the Sabbath, the person asking the questions is told behind the scenes to stop such a line of questioning.

Likewise, the second commandment commands no images of any persons of the Godhead. It also requires that we only worship God in the way that He has authorized in His

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 60.

Word. Yet in evangelical and most reformed churches in our day, pictures of Jesus are common and man-made additions to worship are almost universal. People who speak out against Sabbath desecration, pictures of Jesus and crass violations of the regulative principle of worship are judged as legalistic, unloving and unconcerned about people's real needs. At the same time, people who are *unconcerned* about details, about strictness, about carefulness with regard to these matters are said to be practical and loving. They are said to exemplify the freedom and liberty of the gospel.

The passage before us stands as a great rebuke to the declension in our day, for Jesus says explicitly that the criterion of our standing in the kingdom of God and our reward at the judgment seat of Christ is determined by our observance and teaching relating even to the minutia of God's moral commandments. The Savior demands a strict doctrine and a strict observance of the law. He demands a strictness of behavior and teaching that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 5:20). The only strictness that our Lord criticizes is that which is based on human additions to God's law and not the moral law itself. Christian love and liberty are founded only on God's Word. Those who add human traditions to God's Word are the ones denying Christian liberty, not those who simply insist on adhering only to what the Bible requires. The sad and tragic truth is that Jesus with His strict doctrine on the law would not be welcome at all in many professing Christian churches today. All of this helps us understand why in another place Christ spoke of how sloppiness in the details was the path to greater sin and disobedience. "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much" (Lk. 16:10). Do you have a light and trifling attitude about the little things? Do you believe that unfaithfulness to the least things in God's law is not a big deal? If you do, then you need to examine the state of your heart.

## A Righteousness that Exceeds the Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:20).

After Jesus teaches that greatness in the kingdom is measured by a righteousness that conforms to the moral law in all its details, the Redeemer makes a statement intended to shock the whole multitude who held the scribes and Pharisees in high regard. These men were famous and noteworthy because of their "righteousness." The word "for" connects this statement with what precedes; that is, the necessity for Christ's followers to lead an exemplary life of obedience to God's law. The formulaic "I say to you" indicates that this statement is of great importance. "This verse points to the essence of the matter and provides a clarification of the meaning of v. 18, as well as a confirmation of our interpretation of the pericope."<sup>7</sup> As we examine this passage, there are a number of questions that need to be answered.

(1) Who were the scribes and Pharisees? The scribes (*grammateis*) were the Jewish scholars who were the professional interpreters of God's law in the days of Jesus. These men were respected as very learned in the Mosaic law and they were the ones who worked out all sorts of rules and regulations to explicate the law and fence it. The scribes believed that their job was to take the various general commandments in Scripture and make them more detailed and explicit by adding all sorts of regulations that defined every possible manner of breaking the original command. For example they ruled that carrying a burden on the Sabbath was work. But,

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<sup>7</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 10-13*, 109.

how does one define a burden? “So the Scribal law lays it down that a burden is ‘food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen’—and so on endlessly.”<sup>8</sup>

It was the minutia of scribal law that said that Christ and the disciples were guilty of harvesting crops and breaking the Sabbath for plucking a few heads of wheat when they were hungry. One of the great problems with the scribes was that they, more often than not, were *not* making legitimate inferences and applications from Scripture, but rather were engaged in making all sorts of absurd rules that only in a very convoluted, creative way had any connection to God’s Word. By the time that our Lord began His ministry, the hundreds of absurd legalistic rulings of the scribes had acquired a binding legal authority. The scribal additions to the law over time even acquired a greater authority than the law of Moses itself. What happened was very similar to the great corruptions of Romanism where canon law (i.e. the volumes of church regulations) displaced the simple teachings of Scripture. The scribes also made regulations that were binding on the people that had no connection to Scripture whatsoever, not even a tenuous one.

The Pharisees were the most popular sect within Judaism in the days of our Lord. The name means “the separated ones.” These were the Jews who had separated themselves to live a much stricter obedience to God’s law. (Most of the scribes during the New Testament period were Pharisees.) The Pharisees followed the oral law or rulings of their scribes and even believed that they were as equally inspired and authoritative as the Torah. However, because the oral law handed down supposedly was the definitive interpretation and fencing of the law it was in practice or everyday life more important than God’s law itself. “The NT abounds with allusions to the scrupulous concern of the Pharisees with the minutia of their legalism: the tithing of herbs (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42); the wearing of conspicuous phylacteries and tassels (Matt. 23:5); the careful observance of ritual purity (e.g., Mark 7:1ff.); frequent fasting (Matt. 9:14); distinctions in oaths (23:16ff.), etc.”<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand how radical our Lord’s statement was to the original audience we need to keep in mind that the Scribes were viewed as the greatest teachers on religious piety and moral duty in all Israel. If there had been religious conferences in the first century they would have been the most popular speakers. The Pharisees were known as the group which, in the most scrupulous manner, carried out the teaching of their scribes. “The first were considered the best expounders of Scripture; the latter as the most illustrious patterns of holiness. It was a proverb among them that, ‘If but two men were to enter the kingdom of heaven, the one would be a Scribe, and the other a Pharisee.’”<sup>10</sup> The crowd before Jesus must have been greatly astonished to hear that the scribes and Pharisees were not going to go to heaven. Further, the righteousness of Christ’s followers must exceed that taught by the scribes and lived by the Pharisees.

(2) What does our Lord mean by the term “righteousness” (*dikaiousune*)? There are two possibilities. One is that Jesus is referring to an external righteousness. That is, the righteousness of God imputed to the believer apart from works; the righteousness of justification. The other is that the Savior is speaking of an internal righteousness or the godly behavior caused in Christians by the power of the Holy Spirit—the righteousness of sanctification. That Christ is speaking about sanctification and not justification is proved by the following considerations: a) The

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<sup>8</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:128.

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Hagner, “Pharisees” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4:748.

<sup>10</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:178.

context points to personal behavior and not imputed righteousness. In verse 19 Jesus just spoke about the need to teach and *obey* the whole moral law. Then, in verses 21-42, He contrasts proper Christian behavior with the corrupt teaching on ethics of the scribes and Pharisees. b) Our Lord says “your righteousness” and thus demands a personal righteousness that goes beyond the behavior common among the Jews of that day.

The fact that the Redeemer is speaking about personal righteousness raises another question. Does verse 20 support the teaching that Christians are not justified before God until *after* they attain a certain level of moral achievement? If this verse is viewed in isolation from the rest of Scripture one perhaps could come to such a conclusion. But there are so many passages which teach that our own personal righteousness or sanctification has absolutely nothing to do with our justification or judicial standing before God that such a view must emphatically be rejected (read Ac. 13:39; Rom. 3:20-24, 28; 4:3-8; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:8-9; etc.). What then does our Lord mean? Christ is pointing out the fact that all those who are true believers and have already been justified by faith apart from the works of the law will indeed repent of their sins and will lead lives characterized by godliness (i.e. a sincere habitual obedience to God’s law). Justification and sanctification must not be mixed up or confused, as Romanists have done. They must also not be completely divorced, as antinomians have done. Whenever God declares a sinner righteous based on the merits of Jesus Christ, He also gives a deliverance from the power of sin in the believer. “Surely righteousness alone secures for us a standing before God, but evangelical righteousness is the certain proof thereof, and as the tree is known by its fruits so imputed righteousness can be recognized in no other way than by inward righteousness with its effects in the life.”<sup>11</sup>

(3) Why did the Savior say that His disciples’ righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Although the scribes and Pharisees were known for being scrupulous in doctrine and life, our Lord knew that there were a number of deadly defects in their approach to obedience.

First, the scribes and Pharisees completely neglected the internal heart aspect of keeping the law in favor of a focus on external obedience. Thus Christ at a later point in time rebuked them saying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Mt. 23:25-28).

On the outside, the Pharisees appeared very righteous before men. Because of their whitewash, made up of all sorts of rules and regulations, people believed they truly were righteous and holy. But inside, in the realm unseen by man, they were wicked hypocrites who were lawless. In their hearts there was no true concern for obedience to God’s law. “Among all the sins that Jesus found among men none aroused his fiery indignation more than hypocrisy with its sham of righteousness and holiness. Against no class of men did he hurl invectives that were as severe as those directed against the scribes and the Pharisees: ‘hypocrites.’”<sup>12</sup>

Our Lord presses this very point against a mere external obedience as he continued His sermon. The scribes and Pharisees condemned the outward act of murder, but had no problem

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 912.

with unjust anger and verbal insults (Mt. 5:21-22). They were against the outward act of adultery, but did not condemn illicit lusts in the heart of man. Because the scribes and Pharisees believed in a system of salvation by law-keeping, they of necessity externalized the law to make it easier to obey. But, Jesus demanded a much more radical obedience that came from man's heart and was embraced by every aspect of man's nature. The righteousness that God requires encompasses mind and motive. "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7; cf. Lk. 16:5).

From this we understand why our Lord said to Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again" (Jn. 3:7). The Jews were seeking salvation through the external keeping of laws. Jesus said that man needs a radical inner change of heart first, a cleansing before he can even see the kingdom of God. True obedience must begin on the inside with a work of the Holy Spirit. The attempt to keep the law by amassing a large body of human additions to the law only produces hypocrites. Salvation through trusting in a corrupt religious bureaucracy is a dismal failure. Only the redemption that Christ brings can produce the holiness of life that God requires. As Ezekiel prophesied, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (36:27-28). Does your life or manner of keeping God's law give evidence that you have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit? Do you make your own little rules which enable you to circumvent the true intent of God's Word? Are you seeking purity on the inside, even in your thought life? Although real Christians are far from perfect and must still deal with the flesh and sin daily (see 1 Jn. 1:8; Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:15-25), they never make peace with sin and they seek purity in their minds and bodies.

By way of application, modern believers must be very careful to avoid the externalism found in denominations that focus on ritualism and sacramentalism. In communions such as Roman Catholicism, high church Anglicanism, Eastern Orthodoxy and the like, there is a strong emphasis on attending to rituals, man-made holy days and the church hierarchy as a kind of machine that cranks out saints through external ceremonies. True faith in Christ and genuine repentance has been set aside for the sacraments as a direct means of salvation. Consequently, people are content to live all throughout the week as a heathen as long as they make it to church on Sunday to smell some incense, touch some holy water and partake of the ritual of the eucharist. Such false versions of Christianity have much in common with the apostate religion of the scribes and Pharisees. Also, even if we attend a solid Bible-believing church, we must be on our guard not to become lukewarm and go through external duties while neglecting our hearts. "[L]et your heart keep my commands.... Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart" (Pr. 3:1-3). "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Pr. 4:23).

Second, the scribes and Pharisees had only a partial obedience to the law. That is, they stressed certain aspects of the law (especially the ceremonial ordinances) while they neglected more important elements of the moral law. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (Mt. 23:23). They tithed even of the herbs they grew in their gardens, which was not even required in the law of Moses (the law required tithes from the commercial crops in the field such as grain, wine and oil; cf. Dt. 14:23-23. Leviticus required a tithe of seed and of fruit; 27:30); but they did not treat their neighbors with justice or mercy. At the trial of Christ they were very

careful not to enter the home of Pilate which they believed would render them ceremonially unclean, but they had no problem with bribing Judas, producing false witnesses and conducting an illegal, unjust trial.<sup>13</sup> They were quite willing to convict a completely innocent man to death. The scribes and Pharisees had strained out a gnat, but had swallowed a camel (Mt. 23:24).

Jesus is saying that His disciples need to exhibit a genuine repentance in their lives and not follow the unbalanced, hypocritical lives of the scribes and Pharisees. Our Lord had just made the point (v. 19) that all the moral law must be taken seriously and followed. Christians do not get to pick and choose which commandments that they want to follow and which ones can be ignored. A person who treats parts of the moral law as voluntary or unnecessary and thus habitually violates important ethical principles is not a true Christian. This verse is a very strong rebuke to the carnal Christian heresy which says that righteousness in a believer is irrelevant to salvation (in the broad sense of that term) and is something only for dedicated Christians who desire to submit to Jesus as Lord.

Thus, you need to ask yourself some searching questions. Am I genuinely seeking to obey every aspect of God's moral commandments, even the least of commandments? Do I make excuses in my mind as to why I can break certain commandments? Am I creating loopholes in the law so I can continue to satisfy my lusts and secret sins? Am I using the grace of God in a wicked, illegitimate manner as a reason for carelessness in my personal life? These are very important questions because laxity in morals and sinful behavior always starts in the mind with carnal unbiblical reasoning. The scribes and Pharisees had even developed a very large, sophisticated body of traditions to excuse their sinful behavior. Let us not be like these ungodly hypocrites by remembering that a sincere repentance is an *entire* repentance. Every known sin must be cast behind our back in order to faithfully serve Christ.

There are multitudes of professing Christians in our day, that in many ways, are like the Pharisees in their obedience to God's Word. When they become angry with a brother in Christ they do not resort to physical violence, but instead engage in gossip and slander. They have no problem murdering a man's reputation. They even gossip with a pious sounding voice and a look of concern as if they were rendering the church of Christ a great service by their wickedness. There are thousands of professing Christians who would never rob a bank or steal a car, but are happy to misrepresent their goods to increase sales or to rob their employers by loafing at work. Let us be careful to render to God a full obedience to His laws.

Third, the scribes and Pharisees did not obey God's law with a proper motive—the glory of God. They obeyed in order to glorify themselves, in order to be seen and praised by men. Our Lord would bring this serious defect out later in the same sermon. He said, "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men to be seen by them...do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men...they like to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men" (Mt. 6:1, 2, 5). Toward the end of His ministry Jesus elaborated on this same theme when He condemned the scribes and Pharisees: "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They

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<sup>13</sup> "These rulers of the Jews and the multitude that followed them were thoroughly *Ritualists*. It was their ritualism that urged them on to crucify the son of God. Christ and ritualism are opposed to each other as light is to darkness. The true Cross in which Paul gloried and the cross in which modern ceremonialists glory, have no resemblance to each other. The Cross and the crucifix cannot agree. Either ritualism will banish Christ or Christ will banish ritualism" (Horatius Bonar as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:193).

love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi’” (Mt. 23:5-7).

The scribes and Pharisees did everything they could to appear devout in order to draw attention to themselves. Thus, they did not view the law and obedience theocentrically, but rather anthropocentrically. They, at bottom, were self-worshipping humanists. A true believer is not so concerned about what people think, but rather does his deeds under the omniscient eye of God. He makes it a habit to first consider what Jehovah will think of such a behavior. With Paul he understands that man’s chief end in life and death is to glorify God. “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). This means that we must not treat piety as a tool for popularity, but rather as a means to magnify God. “Let self be forgotten. Let your eye be fixed on God. Let the promotion of his glory be your object in all you do. Strive in every thing to act in such a way that men may praise that God whom you profess to serve.”<sup>14</sup>

It is important for us to recognize that a proper motive is always a crucial aspect of genuine obedience to God. That is why, for an act to be truly good in God’s sight, it must flow from faith in Christ and be rooted in the Savior’s death (cf. Rom. 8:7-8; 14:23). “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:4). “[T]here can be no works good in the sight of God but what flow from, and are connected with the atonement. Good works can be performed only by those who are united to Christ by faith, that is, are in a justified state.”<sup>15</sup>

Because the Pharisees did not humbly approach God through Christ, they were into self-glorification and were constantly focused on their own achievements as laudable and praiseworthy instead of having a humble approach to God. Even their prayers were humanistic and egotistical. “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess’” (Lk. 18:11-12). A truly righteous man does not point to himself and brag but rather says, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk. 18:13)! Christ tells us to have a very different attitude toward our obedience than the Pharisees. “So likewise you, when you have done all those things which are commanded, say ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” (Lk. 17:10). “When we have done all that Christ commands, we have done no more than our duty. Yet even what we do is only from grace given to us, and not from natural strength. And even then in what we do there are countless imperfections. To talk therefore of merit or claim to God’s favor, in the face of such a verse as this, is absurd and preposterous.”<sup>16</sup>

We must search our hearts and make sure that we do good works with a proper heart attitude. Do we do things to glorify God or are we attempting to draw attention to ourselves? Do we acknowledge that everything we have and even the good we do is a result of God’s grace? Do we have the attitude of Paul who said, “But he who glories, let him glory in the LORD. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends” (2 Cor. 10:17)? “Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours” (1 Cor. 3:21).

Moreover, how do we act when no one is watching? Do we act one way in front of the people at church and then another with people at work or school? If we act piously in front of Christians and then worldly and profanely in front of unbelievers, then in principle we are no better than the Pharisees. How do we conduct ourselves when we are all alone when no one is

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857, 59] 1974), 202.

<sup>15</sup> William Symington, *On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ* (New York,: Robert Carter, 1839), 64.

<sup>16</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1986), 2:230.

watching but God Himself? What do we watch and what do we read? Do we fill our minds with the filth of this world or do we redeem the time and think upon good things? The measure of a man is not how he acts when the church is watching, but how he behaves when only God is watching. The person who acts like a heathen when no one is around is either temporarily backslidden or is an apostate—a heathen.

We see in the great error of the Pharisees that one's doctrine of salvation can have a profound effect on one's teaching regarding personal holiness. If our good works do contribute in any way to our salvation (which is precisely what the Pharisees believed), then one's works indeed are praiseworthy and men do have reason to point to themselves and boast. But if we are saved solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ then our good works are non-meritorious. They are not acts to be praised by men, but rather are fruits of the redemption achieved and bestowed by the Savior. As Paul says, "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:27-28).

Fourth, the scribes' and Pharisees' righteousness was built upon legalism or man-made rules and regulations. The Jewish religious leaders erected a system of obedience upon a foundation of human philosophy. Therefore, their righteousness was not true piety, but a man-made false righteousness. They were cheating their followers "through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world" (Col. 2:8). God had repeatedly warned Israel not to add to His law-Word or to detract from it (e.g., Dt. 4:2; 12:32). The reason for this warning is simple. When men add their own rules and regulations to Scripture, people spend their time focusing on human requirements and neglect the Word of God.

The Bible, however, is very clear that only God can define righteousness or right and wrong and that all attempts to be holy based on man's law or the human imagination accomplish nothing. Paul writes, "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:20-23).

The Pharisees thought that they were serving God with their human traditions, but Paul says that their human ideas consisted in "the elements of the world" (Col. 2:8). By their traditions they believed they were attaining a superior righteousness. By and large the Jewish people believed this also. But Paul says that these man-made rules were absolutely useless in producing true holiness. They are of no value in restraining the sinful flesh. Thus, instead of producing true piety, they are at variance with it.

This same error is found throughout the history of the church. Following their human traditions, Roman Catholics have sought righteousness through: pilgrimages, relics, prayers to saints, the worship of the virgin Mary, the confessional, holy water, vows of poverty, celibacy, flagellations, monasteries, works of supererogation, indulgences and so forth. The result has been a degenerate, wicked people who neglect the true teaching of Scripture. They have substituted a false human righteousness for a true biblical righteousness.

Evangelicals and fundamentalists have not been immune from seeking a false righteousness. Their crusades against the use of alcoholic beverages and various styles of music have not produced true righteousness. While they avoid drinking a beer or listening to jazz, they

are quite willing to break the Sabbath, corrupt the worship of God and watch immoral filth on television. True righteousness, as it relates to sanctification, can only be found in the Bible.

How does a person obtain the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees? Obtaining this righteousness involves a number of things. First, there must be an initial change within man by the Holy Spirit. No one can obey God's law from the heart without first being born again. Paul writes, "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7-8). Because man's heart is totally depraved, only an act of God upon the whole nature of man is sufficient to draw him to Christ and give him a genuine desire to obey God. Thus, in regeneration, the Spirit of God penetrates into the innermost recesses of a man and plants the principle of a new spiritual life. This change brings purification and renewal (Tit. 3:5; Jn. 3:5; Ezek. 36:25-26; Col. 2:11).

Regeneration, or the initial partaking of purification (and definitive sanctification), comes only as a result of union with Christ. Thus, the path to righteous living is not through seeking to obey the law *as the path to God*, but rather through faith in Christ who sends His Spirit into us enabling us to follow God's holy law. As Jesus says, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Mt. 7:18). Thus, the starting point of righteous living is the regenerating power of the Spirit that flows out of the efficacy of Christ's sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. Because the scribes and Pharisees rejected their Messiah and sought to establish a right standing before God based on their own righteousness, they resisted the Holy Spirit and did not attain the righteousness of justification or sanctification.

Second, the regenerated and justified sinner must progressively grow in righteousness by using all the God-appointed means of grace such as prayer, Bible reading and public worship. Regeneration is an act of God the Holy Spirit upon the heart in which man does nothing. But sanctification or the spiritual growth of a believer over time requires diligent effort. The Holy Spirit causes us to grow by applying the Word of God to our hearts. "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). "You have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit" (1 Pet. 1:22). "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby..." (1 Pet. 2:2). "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11). Because the scribes and Pharisees did not believe in Christ they did not receive the Holy Spirit, who is the source of all true holiness. Because they essentially replaced the moral law of God with their own human traditions, they lost the chief instrument used by God's Spirit to sanctify His people.

Sanctification is completely dependent on a believer's union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection (Rom. 6:2-20; col. 3:1-3). Believers are to reckon themselves to be dead to sin and alive to God on account of Jesus' redemptive work. We are to put off the sins of the old man and put on the new man. Sanctification as a process consists of two parts. First, sin is subdued in the believer. Sinful lusts and habits are progressively removed from the Christian's life. Secondly, the believer becomes more righteous and godly in his personal life. Once again we point out that a righteous life can only flow out of a belief in Jesus Christ. As long as the scribes and Pharisees rejected what Moses and the prophets said about Jesus, they were doomed to a life of only a surface, partial, hypocritical obedience to God's moral law.

Third, all true believers in Christ will be made perfectly righteous subjectively when the Redeemer returns and all the saints receive glorified spiritual bodies that are incapable of committing sin. While our Lord was focusing His attention on the necessity of holiness *in this life* in order to be a true disciple, nevertheless it is important to point out that the scribes and

Pharisees will not participate in the coming ethical perfection of the saints that is a gift earned by Christ. Their hypocrisy, lusts and sins will go to hell with them. Jesus secured our deliverance from the guilt of sin as well as its power. But, because of our carnal nature and the remnant of sin, our life remains one of constant warfare against the flesh and sin. Paul said, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal. 5:16-17). Therefore, our salvation from sin in the broad sense of that term comes only at the end of history at the final resurrection.

(5) By way of application we need to ask ourselves: How do we know that we possess the kind of righteousness of which the Savior speaks? There are a number of things that we should examine.

First, the central question (even on an issue such as sanctification or subjective righteousness) is: Are you trusting in Christ alone for our salvation? Some may think that this question is unrelated. But we have noted again and again that true faith is always related to genuine righteousness. Regeneration and justification must take place before a person can be progressively sanctified or made godlier over time. Anyone who claims to be holy that does not embrace Jesus Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures is living in self-deception, just like the scribes and Pharisees. Further, given the fact that all of our righteousness and good works are tainted with sin and defective, it is important to recognize that the defects of a believer's personal righteousness are covered by the blood of Christ. Even as Christians who try to give God our very best, we have nothing that commends us to God. But God rewards our good works because they are covered by the infinite merits of Jesus. God looks favorably at our good works because we are clothed with Christ's righteousness and not because we actually merit anything ourselves. Thus, even our rewards are rewards of grace.

Second, are you manifesting fruits of righteousness in your life? Jesus said that a tree can only be known by its fruit (Mt. 7:20). Therefore, the way to examine your righteousness, to see what kind it is, is to analyze your behavior in light of Scripture. Have you repented of all known sins and replaced them with godly behavior? If you are still hanging out with your old unconverted friends and are still leading your old sinful lifestyle, then you can be assured that you have not manifested the righteousness required by our Lord. You must put away your old life forever. You must reckon it dead in Christ; you must leave it in the cold dark grave where it belongs. If you have a new heart and the Spirit of God living inside of you, then that old life of sin and lust will mean nothing to you. Your new heart of flesh will cling to Jesus and will seek to please Him in all things.

Are you serious about your personal holiness? Remember, Christ did not come to annul God's moral law as a rule of life, but rather to cause men to have a high regard for it and obey even its less weighty precepts. Therefore, we must be diligent in attending the means of grace and cultivating personal godliness. If a person does not bother to attend church, or read the Scriptures or pray on a regular basis, then there is concrete evidence that he has not attained the righteousness that our Lord requires. The idea that we can accept Jesus as our Savior and live any way we please and still truly be sons of God is a great delusion. "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Hughes writes, "True holiness however, is inward and private, between a man and his God, and the good deeds which are its fruit are performed as secretly as possible as an expression of loving concern and with an aversion for all fanfare and publicity (Mt. 6:1-18). This kind of holiness, which reflects the pure goodness of God, springs from single-minded love of God, not from love of human

applause, and is consistent with a longing to see the Lord, who is all-holy, not with a lust to be seen by men. ‘Those who are not holy and pure in heart will not see God,’ writes Lefevre d’Etaples, ‘and this is the most tragic loss of all and the ultimate evil of all.’<sup>17</sup>

(6) What does Jesus mean when He says that those who do not have a personal righteousness superior to the scribes and Pharisees “will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:20)? The expression “the kingdom of heaven” can be used in Scripture to describe the visible church (Mt. 16:18-19) or even the domain of Christ’s reign on earth. In this passage it is used in a more narrow sense of salvation itself or the kingdom of glory. Our Lord uses this expression in the same manner in Matthew 18:3: “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” The phrase “by no means” is a strong negative which means that there is no possibility whatsoever that people without this superior righteousness can enter heaven. Thus the Savior, in a most decisive manner, bars everyone from paradise whose righteousness is of the same quality as that of the scribes and Pharisees. This is a very radical statement that merits our close attention. Personal godliness does not save anyone. However, no one is saved without also being personally regenerated and sanctified. As Paul says, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Faith without works is dead, phony, counterfeit and worthless. May God enable us by His grace to love Jesus more and more, to obey His voice and glorify Him in everything.

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 536.