

Q. How can our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? (Matthew 5:20)

A. I'm struck by the fact that, whatever their background—whether Evangelical or liberal or even cultic—teachers usually agree on their understanding of this verse. The question is, does the Bible agree with them?

Matthew 5:20 is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The verse says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." The interpretation that most agree on is that the scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites who claimed to keep the law, but who majored in external minors and did not understand the important spiritual aspect of the law. For our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, then, we must avoid hypocrisy and obey the spiritual aspect of the law.

Notice that Jesus immediately follows His statement in verse 20 with specifics, such as: "Everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause will be in danger of the judgement; and whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' ["empty (head)"] will be in danger of the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna" (verse 22); and "everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (verse 28).

In verse 48, Jesus says, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." Ah, well that's simple. Let's just be perfect. "Perfect" is from the Greek *teleios*, which here means "nothing missing to make it complete." So, looking back on the context, we see that Jesus is saying that we are to behave in complete love and righteousness, perfectly obeying the law without hypocrisy. After pointing this out, this sermon transcript on the Armstrong-following Church of the Great God website, sums up by saying,

Brethren, Jesus raised the standard far above what the Pharisees could conceive of, and as we honestly try to fulfill that standard with serious prayer, study, fasting,

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meditation, with obedience and righteous works, we can be confident and assured that our righteousness, with God's help will indeed exceed that of the Pharisees.

"Sermon: More Righteous Than the Pharisees?"

(<http://www.cgg.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Audio.details/ID/2142/More-Righteous-Than-Pharisees.htm>)

But the followers of Herbert W. Armstrong are by no means alone in this. The website of the Pilgrim Covenant Church, which apparently adheres to the Westminster Standards, has this to say about Matthew 5:20:

[I]t is hardly possible that [the imputed righteousness of Christ] is what Christ is referring to. The context of His statement suggests that He is referring to our actual keeping of the commandments of God.... In other words, the demands of the Law remain unchanged. Christ is especially referring to the Moral Commandments. He makes it clear by proceeding to expound the commandments (vv. 21-48).

So then, it is clear that Christ is not speaking about imputed righteousness in verse 20. Rather, He is teaching us that if we are to enter the kingdom of God, we must obey the Word of God more than the scribes and Pharisees.

Article on Matthew 5:20

(<http://www.pilgrim-covenant.com/q-a/what-does-jesus-mean-when-he-says-except-your-righteousness-shall-exceed-the-righteousness-of-the-scribes-and-pharisees-ye-shall-in-no-case-enter-into-the-kingdom-of-heaven-matthew-5-20>)

Truth Magazine writes, "Your righteousness must surpass [the Pharisees] in kind, as the result of the forgiveness of sins based upon humble, trusting obedience. Your righteousness must exceed theirs in degree, as you strictly strive to serve God from your heart and pray for forgiveness when you stumble" (Keith Sharp, "Sermon on the Mount: Righteousness That Exceeds the Pharisees")

(<http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume21/TM021358.html>).

I could go on, but according to my very informal survey, over 80 percent of websites discussing Matthew 5:20 take a position similar to those above. So, according to most teachers, in order to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and enter the kingdom of heaven, we must obey the law more strictly without hypocrisy and

according to the spirit. We must not be angry with our brother without cause, we must not look on a woman with lust, and many other such things. By doing this, we will have a righteousness that will allow us to enter the kingdom of heaven. Law keeping or morality, then, becomes the basis for our entering the kingdom of heaven.

Dikaiosunē

Do you think you can perfectly obey the law? What happens if you slip up once? Or twice? Or maybe even three times in a day? What then? Do you ask for forgiveness? On what basis will you get that forgiveness if you are trying to establish your righteousness on your works? No, if you are slipping up, then, according to the rules established by these teachers, your righteousness is not exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees. And, if that is the case, then you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Sorry.

This is the kind of mess we get into when we don't interpret Scripture with Scripture. The word translated "righteousness" in Matthew 5:20 is *dikaiosunē*. Besides "righteousness," it can also be translated "justice" or "justification." The Greek words that are translated "justification" and "justified" in the Bible are directly related words. When we are justified, we are declared righteous.

So, when these teachers say that Jesus, in Matthew 5:20, is linking our righteousness with law keeping, they are linking our justification to law keeping. They are saying that we are justified by our works of the law. But these verses directly contradict this claim:

Because by the works of the law, no flesh will be justified [*dikaioō*] in his sight. For through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the law, a righteousness [*dikaiosunē*] of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness [*dikaiosunē*] of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; being justified [*dikaioō*] freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth to be an atoning sacrifice, through faith in his blood, for a demonstration of his righteousness [*dikaiosunē*] through the passing over of prior sins, in God's forbearance; to demonstrate his righteousness [*dikaiosunē*] at this present time; that he might himself be just [*dikaios*], and the

justifier [*dikaioō*] of him who has faith in Jesus. Where then is the boasting? It is excluded. By what manner of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. We maintain therefore that a man is justified [*dikaioō*] by faith apart from the works of the law.

Romans 3:20-28

If you are honest, you know that you cannot be perfectly righteous in this life. Sure, we should work toward the standards Jesus gave because they are ways of showing love toward others. But they also show us how much we need Jesus' righteousness. They are not where we are to obtain our righteousness. There is only one way in this life that our righteousness can ever really exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. That way is not by our law keeping; it is by faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ.

Israel's Error

Did the scribes and Pharisees have a problem with hypocrisy? Certainly (Matthew 23:13-39). Was that their only problem? No. They were seeking righteousness through the law. Even if they weren't hypocrites, they would not have been able to enter the kingdom of heaven as long as they were seeking to enter by the righteousness of the law instead of the righteousness that comes by faith (Romans 9:30-33).

Trying to establish righteousness through the law was Israel's error: "For being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they didn't subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the fulfillment of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:3-4). Paul considered his own Jewish pedigree, his being a Pharisee, and his law keeping to be loss: "Yes most certainly, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and count them nothing but refuse, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Philippians 3:8-9).

Israel's error has become the error of many in Christendom today. They may even occasionally speak of justification through faith, but they contradict this with talk of righteousness by works. Our righteousness can exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees only when

we trust in the atoning work of Christ alone so that the finished work of Christ justifies us. Being then justified not "by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16), our righteousness greatly exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. It is, in fact, the righteousness of Christ. The Spirit then leads us to try to adhere to the spirit of the law of Christ (some details of which Jesus gave us in the Sermon on the Mount) and show our salvation by working outwardly the salvation that God is working in us (Philippians 2:12-13). We should not, however, expect perfection in this life, and our failures do not condemn us (Romans 8:1).

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness [dikaiosunē], for they shall be filled.

Matthew 5:6

Peter Ditzel