

“But I Say to You...”

“You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...” (Matthew 5:21-22).

We all love the story of someone who courageously climbs their way out of the pit to the top of life's ladder. And we're all enchanted by the underdog who overcomes their obstacles and shortcomings to a reach place of prosperity. Whether it's the story of Rudy's grit that gains him a spot on the Notre Dame football team, or one of the countless tales where the undersized, outgunned protagonist pulls herself up by her bootstraps and perseveres until she has accomplished the goal or gained the victory, the story of someone who swims against the stream to do impossible things fascinates us. And it should. Afterall, we live in a world where initiative and elbow grease are celebrated character traits that often lead to success.

And yet, we run into a serious problem when we try to apply this work ethic to our spiritual lives. While stories of hard work are inspiring as we seek to make our way in the world, they actually hinder the work of the Spirit, and ultimately, these stories of self-reliance can keep us from receiving God's saving grace. Let me say it another way. The things that lead to success in the world, often lead us away from the Lord. This is true, because living in your heart and mine is an innate desire for independence and a human nature that wants to save itself. Luther referred to this natural state of being as the Old Adam, and this Old Adam is not interested in handing the keys over to anyone. In fact, the Old Adam clings to the flawed idea that good intentions and hard work somehow add up to a righteousness that God will have to notice.

Well, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus declares war on the Old Adam, and He launches His attack with these words: “You have heard that it was said to those of old...” This phrase was a direct reference to the Law of Moses, and the scribes and Pharisees had turned this sacred Word of God into a legalistic set of rules that, with enough will power, they could essentially keep. In fact, upholding these outward manifestations of the Law is what “righteousness” meant to them. This false teaching was a manipulation of Scripture, and it was an abject lie, and in the light of this self-justifying, self-righteous abuse of the Law, Jesus went on the offensive. And it was an assault that no one in this crowd would escape.

“You have heard that it was said...But I say to you.” In this simple refrain from today's Gospel reading, Jesus redefines the Law in a way that leaves no heart untouched. And He begins with a commandment that seems to have a blatantly obvious meaning: “Do not kill.” Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (5:21-22). The Jewish leaders had reduced this commandment to something they could measure and manage, and yet before we condemn their shortsighted scope of the Law, the fact of the matter is, we do the very same thing. I mean, most of us have never physically killed another person, but how perfectly have we loved others? Or how easily do we become angry with others? And in our anger how quickly do we hurl insults and hold grudges? And as Jesus expands the meaning of this commandment, we suddenly find ourselves as condemned as someone on death row.

And while they were still reeling from the shock of this unreasonable revision to the Fifth Commandment, Jesus moves right on to the Sixth. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (5:27-28). In the wake of these words, I'm sure you could have heard a pin drop. You see, just as it is in our time, many in Jesus' day downplayed the seriousness of sexual sin, and yet here Jesus says that this commandment doesn't simply condemn sex outside of marriage, instead He moves the bar from the simple sins of the body to the secret sins of the heart. Now, our lustful thoughts that no one could ever know are just as damning as physical adultery.

“You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.” With these words Jesus destroyed the loopholes that the scribes and Pharisees had worked so hard to find, and this new, unbending interpretation moved the Law from a challenging guideline to an impossible demand. Here, Jesus convicted the most righteous people around, and if model citizens like the scribes and Pharisees were guilty of transgressing God’s Law, then there can be no hope for people like us. And arriving at this place of utter hopelessness in our own “righteousness” is exactly where Jesus wants us because unless the Old Adam dies under the perfect and impossible demands of God’s Law, we will never understand our true need, and if we don’t understand our need, then Jesus Christ is meaningless.

You see, the Law requires perfection. This is the lesson of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). And later, He tells his audience that they must, “Be perfect” (Matthew 5:48). These words weren’t meant to improve their behavior or increase their standing in God’s eyes. Instead, Jesus spoke here to destroy their illusions of righteousness, and to shock them into a place of honesty, and to kill the Old Adam. And just as it was on the mount where Jesus preached His sermon, so it is today.

You see, today God’s Word shows us who we really are, and the Law of God exposes the sin that has separated us from Him, and yet it does nothing to save us (Romans 3:20). And the really hard truth is, we can never meet God’s impossible demands, and when we finally hear and understand this truth, there is nothing for us to do but throw up our hands and cry out for help as we die at the foot of His cross! And this is a cry that God always hears! You see, at this moment of surrender, as the Old Adam breathes his last, God creates new life. Just like with the dry bones in Ezekiel’s valley of death, the Spirit gives life, a new man emerges, and this new and righteous creation is one of faith, and hope, and love.

Today, Jesus not only opens up the true force and meaning of the Law, He also redefines righteousness. Paul spells this out for us in Romans when he writes, “For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last” (Romans 1:16-17). This means that by faith in Christ Jesus we have been given a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, and in Jesus Christ the unbending Law of God has been fulfilled. This means, that in Christ Jesus, all your sins are washed away; that His blood has paid for every murder and every harsh word, and every affair and every divorce, as well as every look that was a little too long, that His blood has covered every untruth we have uttered and every promise we have broken. And that even though our hearts are corrupt by nature, God has declared us righteous.

That is what true righteousness means, and you didn’t do anything to get it. This Gospel truth is so important for you to hear today because the assurance of eternal salvation depends on it. The Law’s demands will either break you or turn you into a Pharisee, and both conditions leave you separated from God. But it’s not about what you have to do better, it’s about what Christ has done for you! Today, you are accepted by God perfectly and completely because Jesus has kept the Law on your behalf, and has taken the punishment your sin deserved, and now, as Paul proclaims in utter joy, “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Today, this is what God says to you. And today, this proclamation of new life has transformed you from being scorekeepers and policemen, to serving as joyful ambassadors of freedom and bold preachers of forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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