

Pako Morning Service 19/02/2017

Scripture Readings: Rom 3:21-26; Mat 5:17-21; Sermon: "Beating the Scribes and Pharisees"

Congregation, the question I have for you this morning is how do we surpass the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees? I ask, for it is one thing to be critical of the Scribes and Pharisees, it's quite another to be beat them in righteousness! For the Jews in Jesus day, to live a righteous life was to keep the law, and the Scribes and Pharisees were diligent in trying to obey the 600 plus laws recorded in the Law. For instance, they specified proper Sabbath rest by setting precise limits on work. They codified how far one might walk (one thousand yards), how much one might write (one word), and how much food one could take out of storage (one gulp) without breaking the Sabbath.

Now on the one hand that shows how pharisaical they were, but also that they were committed to not transgressing the law. Peter Adam's in his address at the opening of the new RTC premises in Melbourne, asked those gathered, "When was the last time you repented of a sin?" He was making the point that we are quick to pray, "Lord forgive us for our sins" (a broad-brush approach), but when was it the last time you actually became aware of a sin and did a turn around?" It's worth considering.

So how do we surpass or if you like beat the Scribes and Pharisees with a righteousness that is acceptable to God? We have been told what we are to be in the Beatitudes, and how we are to live, namely as a salting salt and a light on a hill, so that the world may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven. And the rest of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount gives us a clue on how to live righteous lives. A righteous life is to characterise the Christian. But how do we do that? What is righteous, what is good? How righteous are we meant to be? What is the yard stick, the bench mark?

Is it enough not to murder or steal or commit adultery? Jesus says our righteousness must surpass the Scribes and Pharisees. And notice also that Jesus isn't saying that the Scribes and Pharisees are not good, what he is saying is that they were not good enough! **"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law you will certainly not enter into the kingdom of heaven."** And that is where the problem lies. For not only do wish to attain heaven as Paul did, what the Pharisees and teachers of the law had insisted upon for centuries, according to Jesus, fell short of the mark as far as entry into heaven was concerned! We need to have a better righteousness!

Now we know that obedience to the moral law, the Ten Commandments, has great value. It not only shows that we are sinners and need of a Saviour; it not only restrains sin in society, but it also helps us to live righteously before God. However, there is a vast difference between living 'righteously' and having a righteousness that surpasses the Scribes and Pharisees to which Jesus is referring. The Scribes and Pharisees probably strived to obey the Ten Commandments and the rich young ruler did. But he too, was found to be short of the mark and went away sad.

And we cannot say that Jesus is demanding too much. Jesus' teaching is not only completely in harmony with the OT, he fulfilled it perfectly and it is completely in disharmony with what was being taught by the Scribes and Pharisees. Furthermore, on several occasions obedience to the law is empathized by Jesus and other writers of the NT. The problem with the Scribes and Pharisees and sometimes with us is that we think so long as we strive to obey the law, we're Ok, for Jesus will make up any short fall in our obedience. Well if that is our understanding, then our righteousness is going to fall short of the mark as well.

If it is as simple as just having Jesus make our short fall, for we cannot fulfill it properly anyhow, then why have a law section every Sunday morning? Isn't that somewhat cruel? By having a law section, are we not just heaping guilt on everyone? In fact, let's forget about the law and just focus on grace? Well, before we do that, there are some things we need to consider.

First, we acknowledge, that obedience to the law has never saved a single human being unto eternal life, other than Christ Himself. Second, before we throw out the law, let us note that Jesus isn't saying the law isn't necessary. In fact, the law, properly understood is very necessary as I said earlier. The conundrum is the temptation to place obedience to the law, not as a thankful response, but as a way of salvation. And over the centuries, this obedience to the law, has even been added to, often with man-made rules and traditions. For instance, some churches teach that unless you are baptised, heaven may never happen for you. Others, say that unless you do your profession of faith and participate in the Lord's Supper you will never get into the kingdom of heaven! Some have even said that if you don't attend worship twice every Sunday, or have the right Bible translation, you can't get to heaven or at the very least you are a very poor Christian. Personally, I think people and churches who insist on these things are guilty of spiritual blackmail. What they have done, knowingly or unknowingly, is to simply replace the yoke of the 600 plus Levitical laws applied by the Scribes and Pharisees, with some modern-day laws, something that was never intended by the Lord.

So, what is the key to this 'righteousness' that we need which surpasses the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees? I suggest it can be summed up in one word, Jesus. Jesus said it himself in Jn 14:6; "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In Jesus alone lies the only answer to surpassing the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus says in our text that he has come to fulfil the law and the Prophets, and ultimately, He did that through his coming, living, dying, for in all those things he did not sin! And resurrection is proof that God the Father was perfectly satisfied with the payment made.

By ushering in the kingdom of heaven through his living, dying and resurrection, Jesus has brought obedience to the law to a higher level. He speaks about it in our text. Note vv 18-20; Jesus said that not a single item of the law or the prophets shall fail, not ever, until heaven and earth disappear – until everything is accomplished! He makes that clear by mentioning the smallest letters, the Greek 'iota' which represents the Hebrew smallest letter 'yodh' and the Latin where it mentions 'stroke' a dash that appears above a letter.

We need to understand, that Jesus is not saying that the law and prophets no longer apply because he has arrived and will soon die and be raised and therefore it is finished with. Not at all. Nor does Jesus conceive his life and ministry in terms of opposition to the OT law and prophets! Rather, Jesus sees his life in terms of bringing the OT to fruition. The whole OT finds its fulfillment in Him as Luke 24:44 makes that clear. So, what Jesus is teaching us is that a fresh approach is needed when considering the OT law and prophets.

Indeed, some of it was just for the OT people such as the civil and ceremonial laws, but some of the OT was prophetic and finds its continuity in the Lord Jesus and the new Kingdom! In Mat 13:52, Jesus says that every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.

That is also why Jesus continues in verses 19-20, to say that anyone who breaks one of the least of 'these commands' and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. The expression 'these commands' do not refer to the OT laws, but to the laws of the "Kingdom of heaven" which is mentioned three times in these two verses. So, what are these commands of the kingdom? It not only involves obedience to the Ten Commands, but also our civil duty to love our neighbour and live as the new redeemed people of God, and ceremonially in that we offer ourselves as living sacrifices.

So, Jesus not only fulfils the law and the prophets through his perfect obedience in life, death and resurrection, but by so doing ushers in a whole new standard of obeying the law for his people to follow! And the height of folly is not to do what Jesus ushered in when he fulfilled the law and the prophets by his perfect obedience! So, just as the Beatitudes make poverty of spirit a necessary condition for entrance into the kingdom, so our text ends up demanding a kind of righteousness which must have left Jesus' hearers gasping in dismay and conscious of their own spiritual bankruptcy! And it probably leaves us gasping as well, for throughout the Sermon on the Mount we find a great emphasis on obedience to Jesus who through his death and resurrection brings in the new kingdom.

Now in some ways it would be easy for me to jump back to the cross and say that Jesus has done it all anyhow, so what's the issue! But that is not where this text leaves us. The issue is obedience at a higher level! In Ch 7 towards the end of this Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." In fact, the gospel of Mathew finishes on the same note – "Baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that I [Jesus] have commanded."

We must not make the mistake of thinking that because Jesus has come and done for us what we could never do by fulfilling the law and the prophets, that we have been let off the hook so to speak! Jesus' view on righteousness has not been so tempered with love and grace that the righteousness required slips down to a lower level than when its standard was dictated by law.

In fact, the opposite is true. We discover that the righteousness demanded by Jesus surpasses anything imagined by the Pharisees or the teachers of the law. Christ's way was more challenging and more demanding as well as more rewarding than any legal system could ever be! So, in some ways I hope this text does leave you gasping and wondering, "Who then can be saved?" for that is its purpose. That was also Luther's struggle. He knew that a righteousness was needed that he could never attain! After reading our text, we're not meant to sit back and say, "Well the Lord has fulfilled the law therefore we don't need to worry." That's true in a sense, but that is not the point of this passage. With the coming

of Jesus, the bar of righteousness hasn't been lowered but raised. We need to come to the same understanding that Paul came to. Paul was just one of the best Pharisees before he was converted. "As for legalistic righteousness, faultless" [Phi 3:5-6]. Yet when he first understood the gospel he realized that his spiritual assets were rubbish! He didn't have the righteousness that the commands of the new kingdom demanded.

That is why the words in Rom 3:21 are so comforting - "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify." The Sermon on the Mount lays the foundation for the great doctrines of justification by grace alone through faith alone and sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit! The more we realize the new righteousness that is required for entry into the Kingdom of heaven, the more we will appreciate what Jesus actually did by not only coming and therefore fulfilling the law and prophets, but especially by his full obedience, his great love for his neighbour and the perfect sacrifice paid for our sin.

How important it is then to be found in Christ, for he alone is our righteousness, and apart from him we can do nothing! And it is only with His righteousness that we can be the Church Jesus wants us to be and offer ourselves as living sacrifices in His service and obey His law. And surprise, surprise, it is only with that righteousness we can beat the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, for it is the only righteousness with which the Father in heaven is satisfied. Amen.