



Part 30: Jesus and Righteousness

Kingdom righteousness is both the gift and goal of our relational life of love with God in His Kingdom.

I. Navigating Cultural & Biblical Confusion

Q: What does God require of us? This is a question that will evoke all kinds of responses in our culture...even in the Church we are likely to hear a range of responses.

Jesus is addressing this question in our Scripture today – focusing on Matthew 5:20.

“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:20

Jesus could not have made a more shocking and provocative statement in his culture! To grasp how shocking this would have been to his hearers, today we might hear him say...Billy Graham or the Pope.

This Scripture today is a good example of why the Bible can be challenging to understand. First, Jesus is referring to two groups who do not exist today in our culture. Second, he uses the word “righteousness,” which is not a part of our cultural vocabulary.

Let’s address the identity of these two groups first, and then work our way towards a Biblical understanding of righteousness.

The Pharisees were a reformist movement in First Century Judaism that aimed to purify Israel through meticulous observance to the Jewish law (torah = first 5 books of Old Testament).

The teachers of the law, also known as rabbis or Scribes, were trained in interpreting the Jewish law and how the various commands were to be lived out.

These are the two groups, along with the Sadducees, who were in constant opposition to Jesus (Matthew 12:38; 15:1; 16:1; 21:15). Jesus rightly predicted that these groups would have him killed (Matthew 16:21; 20:18; 21:15; 26:57; 27:41).

II. Righteousness

A. Right-Relationship

“Relationship is what righteousness is all about...righteousness is all about living in faithfulness to the terms of the relationship.” – Darrell Johnson

The righteous are those who live rightly or faithfully according to the claims in any given relationship.

B. Righteousness in Paul

Righteousness in Paul is most often the gift of right relationship with God through faith in King Jesus (Romans 1:17). This right relationship with God is His gift to us rather than his wages for our work (Rom. 3:21-31; Ephesians 2:8-9). Hence the truth that we are “saved by grace through faith.”

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” Ephesians 2:8

But Paul also speaks of righteousness as the conduct of those who belong to God now empowered by the Holy Spirit.

“And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” Romans 8:4

Paul sees righteousness as both God’s gift and goal of our relational life of love with God in His Kingdom.

C. Righteousness in Matthew

Righteousness in Matthew is the right conduct of those who belong to King Jesus. It is this righteousness that we are to pursue, seek, and for which we may be persecuted for (Matthew 3:15; 5:6, 10; 5:20, 48; 6:33).

D. Jesus

Jesus also sees righteousness as both God’s gift of relationship as well as the goal which we are to pursue in our lifestyles.

“Do not be afraid little flock, for your Father in heaven has been pleased to give you the kingdom.” Luke 12:32

“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit.” John 3:5-6 (Ezekiel 36:24-27)

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”
Matthew 5:6

“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your
Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:16

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Matthew 6:48

III. Jesus vs. the Religious Leaders

Q: Why does Jesus oppose the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

The religious leaders misrepresented the nature of our relationship with God. They viewed it more as a contractual relationship of employment rather than a covenant of love.

Matthew 23 records Jesus' stinging rebuke of these men:

- They were concerned mostly with external appearance (Matthew 23:5-7)
- They perverted God's law by emphasizing the strict legal obedience to the letter of the law rather than the heart behind the law (Matthew 23:16-22, 25-29)
- They were effectively shutting the people out through their burdens and hypocrisy (Matthew 23:13-14)

In Luke he teaches a parable to reveal that they were really trusting in their own morality and religious observance rather than God's mercy and grace (Luke 18:9-14).

They didn't see the need for the gift, and they focused on the wrong goal.

IV. The Cycle of Grace and Faith

“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Romans 1:17

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you think the average person in our culture would respond to the question: What does God require of us?
2. How would you answer that question?
3. Doug says that righteousness is both God's gift of a love relationship with him (through Jesus) and it's the goal we are to pursue in our lifestyles. Do you think the Bible supports this view? What Scriptures has he cited in support of this? Can you think of any more Scriptures that support or challenge his view?
4. How do you feel about the truth that God has freely given you a right relationship of love with Him through Jesus? Have you ever received it?
5. How do you feel about the truth that those in a right relationship with God through Jesus are now empowered by the Holy Spirit to pursue the goal of being like Jesus?
6. What has it been like for you to try to live by faith in God's free grace?