

We've Got A Message

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All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version. Italics for emphasis are ours.

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INTRODUCTION

“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” (Matthew 5:20).

Recently, I did a study of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). As I read these three chapters over and over again, the Holy Spirit revealed something—in the progressive spiritual context—that I personally have never understood until now. Jesus Christ preached an entire sermon describing precisely what He meant by His statement in Matthew 5:20, revealing something very deep about His righteousness.

“Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” The righteousness of the Pharisees was superficial and relative—it was based on a program of comparison, not upon the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Their righteousness was not righteousness at all;

it was dead religion.

This message is for every Christian. Some may dismiss it by saying, "I'm saved; I believe in grace. That settles it." That's what *you* think. Jesus was addressing *disciples* in the Sermon on the Mount.

In Matthew 5:13, Jesus says His disciples are "the salt of the earth," meaning, Christianity should make people thirsty for God's brokenness, grace, and righteousness. "Ye are the light of the world," He says in Matthew 5:14. No one puts his light under a basket. Our lives should shine forth the light of His righteousness so that those who are lost will be drawn to Him.

Chapter One

RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT EXCEEDS THE PHARISEES'

There are four predominating spirits in the Church of Jesus Christ today. One spirit is described in a reference to the church of Sardis (Revelation 3:1), which had an evangelical "name" but was otherwise "dead." Next, the church of Laodicea had a spirit of lukewarmness, being "neither cold nor hot" (Revelation 3:16). In their estimation, they had "need of nothing." Then, there is the spirit of the scribes and the Pharisees, who "sit in Moses seat ... but all their works they do for to be seen of men" (Matthew 23:2, 5a).

Finally, there is the spirit of the church at Philadelphia: "For thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come

and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (Revelation 3:8-10).

The key to the spirit of the church of Philadelphia is found in verse 8—"Thou hast not denied my name." The word *name* refers to all of the attributes of God's nature revealed through Jesus Christ's Finished Work—everything that He *is* and everything that He has *done*. The members of that church did not deny any of God's attributes. As a result, those of Satan's synagogue will be forced to bow down before them.

These four spirits are in every church, but they are only revealed through *momentum tests*—a progressive series of tests that reveal our 'way.' A person can be saved for years before a momentum test reveals his way. Though he may be very effective, the intensification of the tests will expose the spirit that predominates in his life, and reveal whether he walks in the narrow way that leads to life or the broad way that leads to destruction.

Superficial Obedience

The religion of the scribes and Pharisees was superficial. According to the letter of the Law, they brought gifts to the altar, but God would not receive their gifts because they did not have a ministry of reconciliation toward their brothers (Matthew 5:24). Jesus told them to leave their gifts at the altar and first be reconciled to their brother before bringing their gifts to God. In other words, the Lord wanted inward transformation to precede their external obedience.

The scribes and Pharisees knew the Ten Commandments. They believed in overt obedience to them, but that's as far as their righteousness went. Jesus said, "You have heard that murder is wrong, but I say if you are angry with a brother without cause, you have committed murder. You agree that no man should commit adultery, yet, you are not right in your thoughts toward women."

The scribes and Pharisees made oaths before God (Matthew 5:33-37), but Jesus Christ taught that instead of giving oaths, our communication should be "Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil" (Matthew 5:37).

Christians have a righteousness that exceeds

the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. As long as we keep the word of His patience, we will not deny Christ's characteristics *in* us.

Loving Your Enemies

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;...Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:44, 48).

Even in regard to the law of retaliation, Jesus said our righteousness is to exceed that of the Pharisees. The law of retaliation was given to protect the innocent party and to keep the guilty from being punished beyond their crime. The Pharisees were well acquainted with that law. But Jesus said to them, "It is no longer an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. When you receive My righteousness and My new life, I say that you will *love* your enemies."

Going Beyond the Superficial

In Matthew 6, Jesus repudiated the Pharisees' outward practice of fasting, praying, and alms-giving. Then, He exhorted the disciples for their worrying and their fear, telling them, "Seek

ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

In Matthew 7, Jesus continued to teach His disciples along these lines, so that they would never allow the spirit of pharisaism to take them over. "I want to take you out of the realm of *your* thinking," Jesus was saying to them. "I want to remove you from *your* frame of reference. You're My disciples. You have walked with Me. You have seen Me preach, work, and serve My Father, but you still have a spirit of pharisaism in you. You still operate on the basis of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. You still don't operate in My righteousness, nor do you even understand it."

"Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matthew 7:1-2). The Pharisees' judgment was based on relative righteousness. Ignorant of God's righteousness, they established their own righteousness by comparing themselves among themselves and measuring others by their standard (2 Corinthians 10:12).

Unless I have Jesus Christ's righteousness reigning in every fiber of my being, I will not be

able to pass the momentum tests that are coming. Only God's righteousness in me can overcome the synagogue of Satan and take me beyond a superficially sound evangelical lifestyle.

Chapter Two

RESPONSES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

“In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jeremiah 23:6).

After the prodigal son, in Luke 15, had squandered all that his father had given him, he came to himself saying, “I have sinned and I am not worthy to be called my father’s son” (Luke 15:18-19). Then, he began his journey home. In Luke 15:20, the father saw his son coming. Remember, he was a son. Jesus wasn’t speaking of an unsaved person. He was illustrating how someone who is desperately backslidden can be restored.

Picture it. The prodigal son is coming home without one speck of experiential righteousness in himself. The father sees him afar off and runs to meet him. God’s eye is always on the backslider, no matter how far off he is, because he

still has God's gift of imputed righteousness. As the father reaches his son, he begins to kiss him on the neck repeatedly.

The son tries to confess to his father saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and I am no more worthy to be called thy son" (Luke 15:21), but his father—too busy rejoicing—pays no attention to the confession. Instead, he calls to his servants, "Give me a ring that I can place upon my son's finger. Bring me shoes for his feet. And let's kill the fatted calf and have a party. My son was lost, but now he's found. He was dead, but now he lives."

Once again, Jesus is teaching a parable that addresses a certain group of people—Pharisees. He reveals that spirit through the elder brother, who reacted to the father's treatment of the prodigal. "I have served you all this time," the elder brother said to his father, "and you have never done anything like this for me! I've worked hard, but you never killed a fatted calf for me. You never threw a party for me."

"I have served you." Sometimes a pastor hears similar words from people in his own church. They remember what they have done and are secretly disturbed when they see prodigals being blessed. Years down the road they

complain, "I worked so hard at that church. I gave my life." All the while, the pastor thought they were serving because of their love for God!

The elder brother was in his home as a son, but he had never understood the righteousness that comes from God (Psalm 22:31), the righteousness of the God of our salvation (Psalm 4:1). He failed to understand, "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jeremiah 23:6). He did not understand it, appreciate it, or honor it. God's righteousness did not bless him, because he was familiar with it. All he could think of was being recognized for the great things he had done.

The elder brother didn't mourn; he wasn't poor in spirit; he wasn't meek; and he didn't hunger and thirst after righteousness. There wasn't a thing about him that was merciful. He wasn't pure in heart, and he wasn't a peacemaker.

The Publican and the Pharisee

"Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus within himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of

all that I possess.

“And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:10-14).

In this parable in Luke 18, the publican—standing off by himself—was so ashamed that he couldn’t even look up to heaven. He prayed, “God, be merciful to me.” The word *merciful* means *propitiation*. He knew there had to be a sacrifice for his sins. In the brilliance of God’s righteousness, in the mercy of His grace, in the love of His compassion, in the power of God’s brokenness, this man went home justified.

The Pharisee was living in a superficial religion. He wasn’t an extortionist. He wasn’t unjust. He never committed adultery. Yet, this Pharisee went home guilty and unforgiven. His religion never went beyond outward evangelical works, with fairly good theology about fasting, giving, going to church, and being moral.

The spirit of the Pharisee is hidden in Christians today; we’re just smart enough not to ex-

press it outwardly. In the secret places of our hearts, we often compare ourselves among ourselves. But when a momentum test comes, some will say, “All those hours I put in. All the time I worked. Where did it get me?”

In Romans 1-3, the immoral man, the moral man, and the religious man are all condemned by God. God doesn't consider the immoral man to be any worse than the moral man or the religious man—none of them have God's righteousness.

“There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). All of our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). In his best estate, man is but vanity (Psalm 39:5b). I must remember this. In my goodness, I am not one inch better than the filthiest sinner in the world. I cannot be pious and think that I am better than anyone else. I'm not, and you're not either. The only righteousness we can claim is the righteousness that has been imputed to us by Jesus Christ.

Chapter Three

GRACE MOTIVATION IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

“Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin” (Romans 4:4-8).

“For he hath made [Jesus Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be *made* the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Thank God that when we believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, His robe of righteousness was placed upon us (Isaiah 61:10). Through the blood of Christ, we have been declared right-

eous (Romans 3:24-25). Sin can not be imputed to us. The Lord doesn't deal with us according to our sins, or reward us according to our iniquities (Psalm 103:10). Our sins have been removed from us, as far as the east is from the west. Jesus Christ crucified the 'old man', destroying the body of sin, and He has imputed *His* righteousness to us without works.

The Key to Real Happiness

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted....” When Jesus was speaking in Matthew 5:1-12, He was addressing those who have God's righteousness, while He challenged the pharisees.

As we receive promises such as these from the Word of grace, we are edified (Acts 20:32). By these “exceeding great and precious promises,” we escape the corruption that is in the world through lust, and we add to our faith virtue—spiritual excellence (2 Peter 1:4-5). God begins to *impart* His righteousness to us, which causes us to think and grow in the righteousness He *imputed* when we were saved. Then we recognize that we have a “poor spirit”—bankruptcy in the natural realm. If we fail, we mourn in sorrow

before the Lord, because we have grieved the Holy Spirit in us. And He comforts us. He makes us meek, and we begin to hunger and thirst after righteousness.

So, whether we are persecuted, reviled, or lied against for righteousness' sake, we can honestly rejoice and be *very* glad! The way has been paved before us, and *great* is our reward!

The scribes and Pharisees' attitude was, "Love those who love you." But Jesus said, "That's not the way it is. Through my righteousness, you love those who don't love you." This is the reason that we have missionaries in many countries throughout the world—we love those who do not love us. It must begin in the Church of Jesus Christ.

We love just as we are loved by God. We forgive as we have been forgiven. We condemn not, because we are not condemned. This is the evidence of being filled with the fruits of His righteousness (Philippians 1:11) and the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

The Strait Gate

Our righteousness must exceed relative righteousness or we have not even reached first base yet. In Matthew 7:14, Jesus said, "Strait is

the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." The gate is strait (narrow) because only those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness can pass through (Romans 5:17).

Christ *is* our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30). The gift of His righteousness sustains us (Isaiah 59:16*b*). Is it any wonder that Psalm 89:16 says, "In thy name shall they rejoice all the day: and in thy righteousness shall they be exalted"? His righteousness exalts, gives grace, and makes us humble, broken, and contrite.

When a believer is filled with the fruit of Christ's righteousness, he never becomes familiar with the things of God. Many Christians, however, are familiar with what they have received. They may not commit overt sins. They attend church and they tithe. But they have grown weary of soul winning, of compassion, of sacrificial love. No matter how the pastor presents his message, it makes them weary. They don't have God's righteousness within them.

All of us in God's royal family, as never before, must be precise in our definition. We cannot afford to sow among thorns (Jeremiah 4:3). Let's sow in righteousness, reap in mercy, and

break up the fallow ground. It is time to seek the Lord until His righteousness rains upon us (Hosea 10:12).

Without precise definition, we will not be able to endure the perilous times (2 Timothy 3:1) or the beginning of sorrows (Matthew 24:8), as the love of many begins to wax cold. When Jesus returns, there will hardly be such a thing as faith found on the earth (Luke 18:8). We will not be able to survive with some of God's righteousness in our theology and some of *our* righteousness in our experience. All of it must be *His* righteousness.

Isaiah was not proud when he saw the Lord high and lifted up on His throne. He could only confess, "I am undone. I'm a man of unclean lips in the midst of a people with unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). There was no pride, no arrogance, no self-righteousness in Isaiah. He was very patriotic in his loyalty to King Uzziah, but he realized that he was unclean. In that moment, an angel came to Isaiah with a coal from the altar and touched his lips, purging him from his uncleanness. Now, he was available to serve God with God's righteousness.

Going Into All the World

Because of God's righteousness, I am motivated to serve God the way Isaiah did. I can't wait to go out and knock on doors Saturday mornings—not because of works, but because the work is so sacred and so thrilling to my heart.

One Saturday, after more than two hours of going from door to door, only *one* person said he *wasn't* interested in hearing the Gospel. A woman shared Christ with a twelve-year-old boy and gave him a Bible. Two hours later, he was still hanging around. "They told me Jesus loves me, and then Jesus saved me. And here's my Bible!" he said. That boy was so happy to be saved. This is the fruit of sharing grace and the gift of righteousness. It's worth more than anything in all the world.

This is the kind of soul-winning ministry Jesus called the fishermen into, in Matthew 4:19: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." James, John, Andrew, and Peter left their nets, gave up the family business, and followed Jesus.

"Follow me! I've got something the world needs," Jesus said. "Follow me! I have the gift of

eternal life that reveals eternal love, eternal grace, eternal mercy, eternal kindness, and eternal forgiveness.”

Our ministry is sending people out month after month. These missionaries are telling people that salvation is by grace, that God will make them righteous the moment they believe, that their sins have been forgiven and that they can be cleansed from all guilt. Everyday in the streets of Calcutta, Moscow, Guayaquil and Baku—from tiny villages in East Africa, to ancient cities in Uzbekistan, to the vast Siberian borders—the message of the Cross is being proclaimed.

Except for remnants here and there, this old-fashioned brand of Christianity is pretty much gone from the scene. This glorious gospel teaches me that I cannot deal with people after their sins, or reward them according to their iniquities. Jesus heals the wounds that sin has caused, whether they're self-inflicted or caused by someone else. The message of abundant grace and the gift of righteousness will reach the hearts of those who have no hope and transform them through the power of the risen Lord.

CONCLUSION

“Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?” (Job 40:8).

As a sinner saved by grace, I plead with you: Don't be familiar with the Word of God, or the work of God. Don't be familiar with the men and women He has raised up to be His servants. Allow the Word of His righteousness to become a fire burning in your bones.

Every morning I take my wife's hand and we begin our day by praising God. We confess His blessings and promises. We pray for people because we live as if every day could be our last. This is the most magnificent time of my life.

Oh, that God would teach our tongues to speak of His righteousness all the day long (Psalm 71:24). By His righteousness we are exalted and we grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Word makes it clear that His righteousness is our shield. We are so blessed.

By the grace of God, let's not be familiar with our churches and our preachers.

Every day when I meet with people, I'm going to say these words: Be positive today. If anyone talks about you, talk about them down on your knees. Deal with every situation and face every responsibility according to the Finished Work abundance of His grace.

God will *always* cause us to triumph. My expectation is from God, not from the devil. I expect love, not hate. I expect forgiveness, not indictment. I expect victory, not intimidation.

Why? Because we have the message that will transform the homosexual, the drug addict, the alcoholic, the fornicator, the gossip, the slanderer, and the maligner. It will even transform someone who lives in relative righteousness. We have the message that brings people to heaven on the trail of grace and builds them up in the trials of their faith. We have *the* message:

“THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”