

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

In the second half of our Gospel today, Matthew 5:17-20, we find the theme of the Sermon on the Mount: *The righteousness that marks Christ's true disciples*. Righteousness is what all religions are concerned about, righteousness among people and especially righteousness in the sight of God.

All religions except Christianity teach that people must find a way to make themselves righteous enough to be acceptable to God, to earn their own salvation. But the Bible tells us, and all Christians believe that sinners are righteous before God only through faith in Christ Jesus. He is our righteousness. He lived the perfect life that God demands and that we cannot even begin to attain - and we get the credit for Christ's work. Now we want to strive for righteousness in our own thoughts and words and deeds.

Jesus did not establish a new religion. He said: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets!*" (v. 17). This expression, "the Law or the Prophets," is a designation for the entire Old Testament Scriptures, the same 39 books we have in the Old Testament section of our Bibles today. From Genesis to Malachi, there is one primary message: all people are sinful and deserve punishment from God, but God promised to send a Saviour from sin. Through faith in that coming Saviour, people living before the time of Christ received God's forgiveness and eternal salvation.

Jesus was (and is) that promised Saviour. He came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. He came to keep all of God's commandments perfectly and to fulfil all the promises about the Saviour that are contained in the entire Old Testament. This will not fail to take place, He assures His disciples here, for not a word, not the smallest letter, of the Scriptures may be set aside as long as this world endures. "*For truly, I tell you, until the heaven and the earth pass away, one jot or one serif will certainly not pass away from the Law until everything is accomplished,*" (v. 18). Scripture is God's inspired Word, and God is truth personified. "*The Scripture cannot be broken,*" Jesus said on another occasion (John 10:35). We properly speak of the Bible as being inerrant and infallible. So does Jesus here and in many other places.

Any contradiction of God's Word is a serious matter. Those who teach God's Word to others bear a heavy responsibility. "*If you hold to my teaching,*" Jesus said, "*you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*" (John 8:31-32).

Here Jesus warns that anyone who does not hold to his teachings "*called the least in the kingdom of heaven,*" (v. 19). Anyone who deliberately contradicts what he knows to be God's truth cannot even be a Christian. But even a sincere believer may become guilty of unwittingly teaching contrary to God's Word. This may be due to ignorance or to a faulty way of attempting to interpret the Scriptures, such as trying to explain in a logical way mysteries of God that are clearly beyond our comprehension. For example, Jesus plainly says that He gives us His body and blood to eat and to drink in the Lord's Supper. Since we cannot explain how that takes place, some teach that the bread and wine are only symbols of Christ's body and blood. Similarly, some regard Holy Baptism as only symbolic, since we cannot understand how this sacrament can generate saving faith and wash away sin.

Such false teachers are not excluded by their false teaching from the kingdom of God as long as they still know Jesus as their Saviour, but God will regard them as "*least in the kingdom of heaven.*" We'll have to wait until we get to heaven to see how God demonstrates their status in His kingdom. For now it is important that we simply realise that any deviation from God's truth exposes one to the danger of losing more of it and finally losing out on eternal salvation. So those who teach God's Word want to evaluate all teachings on the basis of their own study of the Scriptures.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were commonly regarded as examples of righteousness. They believed that God should be fully satisfied with their personal

righteousness and that their place in God's kingdom was secure. But Jesus declares that we have to do better than they do if we are ever to enter into the kingdom of heaven. If you want to use the system of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, Jesus tells us, you will have to outdo them by keeping the law perfectly. He will go on to explain that this involves not only outward acts, but also words and even one's inmost thoughts and desires.

Such perfection is obviously beyond the ability of any of us, so we need to look beyond ourselves for the righteousness that avails before God. Only Christ the Saviour can provide this perfect righteousness for us. He gives us the credit for his perfect obedience to God's law, and God welcomes us into His heavenly kingdom. ¹
