

## Jesus is our holiness

Lots of people like to think to themselves words along the lines of “God is love.” They think, “Jesus is love, and because our Triune God is love, God would never hurt our sensitive little feelings by pointing out our sins or punishing us in the eternal fires of hell.” It’s unfortunate that that is the very kind of poison that gets sprayed from too many pulpits in the Christian church today.

As we draw closer to the end of time, we have continued to remake and recast our Lord as a snugly old grandpa who can’t help but love us, an old softy who will ultimately forget about our sins and take us to heaven in the end, no matter what. But all of that is a lie dreamed up by the devil in order to dismiss and to try and justify our own sinfulness.

Now, please do not misunderstand; God *is* love, and He loves us with a perfect love, and it is because of His perfect love that He wants us to be with Him for all eternity, and at the same time it is because of that perfect love for us that Jesus sometimes spoke harsh words of warning. Love is patient and kind, but not at the expense of dismissing truth.

Indeed, it is the Lord’s heart of love speaking when He warns us, “*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:20).

Ouch. If you listen and hear, those words cut like a knife. Righteousness is being right and perfect. To be righteous is to be able to stand on your own without any guilt - to have lived without ever violating any of God’s Ten Commandments.

These are harsh words from Jesus, especially when you consider the Pharisees themselves. For all appearances, they were a most righteous bunch. They prided themselves on how meticulously they were keeping and obeying God’s Law in every point - all Ten Commandments. But the truth is that even as perfect as they appeared, the Pharisees and scribes still weren’t righteous in God’s eyes. The reason is that they were trying to keep their own laws, not God’s Law, not His Ten Commandments.

The Pharisees thought they had found a sure fire way to keep God’s Law. They had come up with another 613 rules and regulations that, if followed, would keep them from violating any of the Ten Commandments. It was these 613 rules that they lived by and kept, and so, in their minds they were a most holy bunch.

Don’t be too hard on the poor Pharisees though. We all have something of a Pharisee inside of us. Our sinful nature - our old Adam - has a way of doing this as well. Our old Adam comes up with our own rules and regulations that justify and legitimise our own sinfulness because we are sinful and because our Old Adam loves to sin and likes to make rules that skirt around what God says. And if we can manage to live within the bounds of our own rules, then surely we think that God will have to be pleased with our efforts and forget about our failures.

You need only look at something like marriage in our own country to see how we love to do this. Marriage between same-sex persons is about finding a way to justify and legitimise sin; it is about how we as a culture are trying to quiet a guilty conscience. The thought is that if our laws are OK with sin, then we are OK with sin, and then God will have to be OK with sin.

The harsh truth, though, is that we cannot live by our own rules and regulations or make up our own laws so that we can keep them and then be considered holy by keeping them. In fact, that would make things worse because if you manage to keep your own rules, then you will proceed to judge others by your own rules. Before long you are too self-righteous to stand with the other sinners, and you are left alone with a smug attitude thinking that you are better than everybody around you, and there is no one so alone as a Pharisee.

In the end there is only one law by which we are judged, it is God’s Law - His Ten Commandments. And there is only one judgement that perfect Law has for us, and it is that we have all sinned and fall short of what God demands from us in His Law. And the penalty for our sin - breaking God’s Law - is the death sentence of hell.

What this means is if you want to be righteous in God’s sight and enter the kingdom of heaven, then do not try to do it by hiding behind the rules and regulations of mankind and the Old Adam. They are lies of devil, dreamed up by the devil to dismiss and to try and justify our own sinfulness.

But at the same time do not believe the myth that you can obtain righteousness in God’s Law either. Because His Law is perfect, it is impossible for you and me to keep and to obey perfectly. God’s Law is good, but we are sinful - we cannot follow God’s Law constantly without error.

Trying to live and be holy by God’s Law means that if you ever forget or neglect to read your Bible, you’ll go to hell; if you ever get mad at someone, even for a second, the road to damnation is the only way for you; if you ever look at someone who is not your spouse with an eye toward using their body in a sexual way, or simply longing for them instead the one God has given you, then the fires of hell prepared for the devil and his fallen angels will unfortunately receive you too. I know that is harsh, but it is true. That is the way of the Law. The Law is absolute, unbending, and uncompromising. The Law does not allow for loopholes.

But the eternity of hell is not where we belong, and it is not where God desires for you and me to be. That is why Jesus speaks such harsh words, but He speaks them in love for us and for all people. It is because of His love that He warns you and me: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of [what you see in] the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.”

So where do we look for that exceeding righteousness? When we fall flat on our faces in failure before God’s perfect and holy and good Law, where do we look? We look to the One who speaks the warning of love, to Jesus Himself. He is the only One who kept the Law in every way, the only One who is truly righteous in God’s sight. So we look then to the One who said He has come to not abolish the Law but to fulfil all it - for you and for me.

The righteousness and holiness of Jesus is now yours by faith. He has given it to you freely as a gift. In Holy Baptism your Lord has clothed you with His perfect righteousness so that now you too are righteous before your Father in heaven, not because of how well you kept His Law, but because Jesus did it for you; Jesus’ righteousness covers you.

By faith in Jesus, your righteousness far exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees - because Jesus exceeds the scribes and Pharisees, and by faith in Jesus, we sinners will enter the kingdom of heaven - because Jesus is our holiness.