

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES

Mt.5:17-20

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In the Sermon on the Mount in Mt.5:20, we are introduced to the expression “the righteousness of the Pharisees.”
2. Therein Jesus told his disciples, “That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven.”
3. This makes it important that we know what the righteousness of the Pharisees is of which Jesus speaks. That is, if ours must exceed it, surely we need to know what theirs is in order to make sure we do it.
4. Jesus admits that they have a certain kind or type of righteousness. But it’s one that will keep them out of the kingdom of heaven; for the disciples of Jesus can’t enter the kingdom of heaven except or unless their righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees.
5. The word “exceed” adds the idea of comparison, meaning: “by far”; “more than”; “surpass”; “be over or above.”
6. Though in what respect the righteousness of his disciples must exceed that of the Pharisees is not specifically stated in Mt.5:20, the body of the rest of the chapter fully shows what is meant by Jesus in condemning the righteousness of the Pharisees.
7. Theirs was in fact no righteousness at all. Their formal, outward righteousness was only adjudged righteousness by themselves, but before the heavenly Judge it was the very opposite of genuine righteousness.
8. Therefore, the righteousness of Jesus’ disciples that would be over and above that of the Pharisees would be that which is pronounced true righteousness by the one and only righteous Judge, God himself, and would thus admit them into the kingdom of heaven.
9. With this in mind, let us examine the so-called righteousness of the Pharisees in order to see it for what it was by means of their attitude and practices.

II. DISCUSSION

A. FIRST, SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE PHARISEES FROM M’CLINTOCK & STRONG, CYCLOPAEDIA OF

**BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL LITERATURE,
VOL. VIII, pp. 68-76, TO HELP SET THE STAGE FOR THE STUDY.**

Article; Pharisee:

“A designation (in the N.T. and Josephus) of one of the three sects or orders of Judaism in the time of Christ, the other two being the *Essenes* and the *Sadducees*.

I. Name of the Sect, and its Significance

“The name Pharisee is the Greek form of the Hebrew (parish, to separate), and properly denotes one who is separated, i.e. by special practices ... one who separated himself from Levitical impurity and Levitically impure food.

“By the term *Pharisees*, or its equivalent *Chaberim*, i.e. *associates*, is therefore meant all those Jews who separated themselves from every kind of Levitical impurity, and united together to keep the Mosaic laws of purity. As it was natural that all the students of the law would, as a matter of course, be the first to join this association, the appellation *Chaber* ... member, associate, or Pharisee, became synonymous with student, disciple, lawyer, scribe, while those who refused to unite to keep the laws were regarded as, country people, common people, illiterates, irreligious.”

II. The Qualifications for Membership of the Pharisaic Association.

“The most essential conditions which were enacted from every one who wished to become a *Chaber* a member of the Pharisaic association were two. Each candidate was required to promise in the presence of three members that

(i) He would set apart all the sacred tithes on the produce of the land, and refrain from eating anything which had not been tithed, or about the tithing of which there was any doubt; and

(ii) He would scrupulously observe the most essential laws of purity which so materially affected the eating of food and all family affairs.

“The above-mentioned two conditions exacted from candidates for membership of the Pharisaic association are thus expressed in the Mishna (The traditional doctrine of the Jews as developed chiefly in the decisions of the rabbis before the 3rd century A.D.): ‘He who takes upon himself to be conscientious, tithes whatever he eats, and whatever he sells, and whatever he buys, and does not become a guest of an Am ha-Aretz (i.e. a non Pharisee); ... and he who takes upon himself to become a member of the Pharisaic association must neither sell to an Am ha-Aretz moist or dry fruit, nor buy of him moist or

dry fruit, nor become the guest of an Am ha-Aretz, nor receive him as a guest into his house.”

(Perhaps now you understand why they were so critical of Jesus in his associations with sinners.)

B. FOLLOWING MT.5:20 THERE ARE SIX SEPARATE INSTANCES IN MT.5:21-48 REVEALING THE ATTITUDE AND PRACTICES OF THE PHARISEES THAT IDENTIFY THEIR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

1. The first instance, Vv.21-26 – is the case of their perversion of the 6th commandment of the law.
 - a. Vv.21,22a: “Ye have heard that it was said by (to, RV) them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. But I say unto you...”
 - b. Note: Jesus did not say, “Ye have read in the law.” Cf. Mt.21:42.
 - c. He said, “Ye have heard that it was said by (or to)...”; that is, by the Pharisees as your teachers or instructors, who indicated, of course, that this was what Moses said, or, at least, it’s the substance of what you can read in the law of Moses.
 - d. Cf. Jno.12:32-34 for an example of such false assumption from the law, from a possible perversion of 2Sam.7:13; Psa.89:36; Isa. 9:7; Dan.2:44; Mic.4:7.
 - e. The problem was that the Pharisees evidently erroneously assumed and taught that the application of the 6th commandment meant that anything short of the overt act of murder would not bring the danger of hell fire.
 - (1) Note what I was taught early on about the difference between the law of Moses and the gospel of Christ that indicated the same thing.
 - (2) Not so as Jesus shows here. For he is not comparing or contrasting the law and the gospel, but the Pharisaic perversion of the law with the truth of the law.
 - f. How the Pharisees perverted the teaching of the 6th commandment, which they are here implied to have done, was that they ignored the very **root** of the wicked, overt action the commandment forbids, which is to be found in the indulgence of the spirit of hate. Cf. 1Jno.3:15.
 - g. If there were no hate, or no heart-felt desire to hurt, there would be no such action as the 6th commandment forbids.

- h. Thus Jesus exposes them and bids all to understand that it is with this spirit of hate – this anger “without cause” – that the 6th commandment begins.
 - (1) In forbidding the action it of necessity forbids thereby its source, as well as all that follows from indulgence in such a spirit, whatever its shape – all words of contempt even – all that is meant to degrade (v.22).
- i. Thus Jesus follows through with the words of Vv.22-26 and the sins of the heart, as well as what to do about them and the sin produced.
- 2. The 2nd instance, Vv.27-30 – is the case of their perversion of the teaching of the 7th commandment of the law, which Jesus handles in like manner as the previous example.
 - a. Again, it is, “Ye have heard that it was said by (to) them of old time...,” not “Ye have read in the law.”
 - b. Again, the Pharisaic perversion consisting in limiting the teaching of the 7th commandment of the law to the overt, evil deed of adultery – to that alone.
 - c. Here again, Jesus exposed their perversion and their kind of righteousness by showing, in fact, that the commandment, in forbidding the overt, evil deed of adultery, also forbids the inward desire of lust which gives it birth, V.28.
 - d. This the Pharisees disregarded – or did not teach the full application of the 7th commandment to the heart of man.
 - e. So, once again, Jesus is not comparing or contrasting the law and the gospel. He is dealing with the Pharisaic perversion of the law.
- 3. The 3rd instance, Vv.31,32 – is the case of the Pharisaic perversion of God’s law of marriage and divorce in order to justify their position of divorce for every cause.
 - a. Again, it is, “It hath been said,” not “the law says.”
 - b. The Pharisees were perverting not only Deut.24:1-4, but God’s original law stated in Gen.2:24, to try to uphold their doctrine of divorce for every cause. Cf. Mt.19:3-9 (emp.vv.4-6).
 - c. Deut.24:1-4 does not teach that divorce may or should be granted. It teaches that “If” or “suppose”; “And he” write he a bill of divorcement” (V.1); “And suppose she goes and becomes another man’s wife” (V.2); “And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, or if he die” (V.3); “Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife...” (V.4).

- d. Jesus once again exposes their kind of righteousness as being no righteousness at all by revealing their perversion of God's law of marriage and divorce, which allows divorce for only one cause.
 - e. Again, he is not comparing or contrasting the law and the gospel.
4. The 4th instance, Vv.33-37 – is the case of the law of oath taking.
- a. Once again, though they quoted the law, they were guilty of perverting it by contending that certain forms of oaths had no real binding force, or that one was not guilty of “foreswearing” if and when one failed to keep such oaths. See Mt.23:16-22.
 - b. In reality they taught that if an oath did not contain the sacred name of God, they had not forewarned themselves.
 - c. Obviously, Jesus teaches in Mt.23:16-22 that all oaths are sacred and binding.
 - d. “Swear not all” means just that in the limitations of the context of the statement.
 - (1) That is, in ordinary statements or conversation.
 - (2) IN such, “let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay (i.e., Yes or no): for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil,” V.35.
 - (3) By inserting oaths in such communications, as the Pharisees practiced, we imply that our ordinary statements are not trustworthy, that we really can't be believed except under oath.
 - (4) All such use of oaths is rash and foolish.
 - e. When we consider Heb.6:13-17; 7:21; Mt.26:63,64; Rev.10:6; Rom. 1:9; 9:1; 2Cor.1:23; Gal.1:20; Phil.1:8, we see that Mt.5:33 and Jas.5:12 prove that:
 - (1) Jesus' prohibition applies only to rash, idle oaths such as the Pharisees used to try to get around what the Scriptures taught.
 - (2) The Scriptures permit necessary oaths – oaths necessary in government affairs ordained of God.
 - f. Once again, Jesus is not comparing or contrasting the law and the gospel.
 - g. And again, he defines and exposes their righteousness and no righteousness at all!
5. The 5th instance, Vv.38-42 – is the case of the law of retaliation.
- a. Yes, the law taught and authorized, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” Exo.21:22-25; Lev.24:17-20; Deut.19:16-21.
 - b. That is, the criminal shall **give** “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” But it is done through proper channels – through the courts

which exact their penalties according to law, making the penalty equal to the crime committed.

- c. The Pharisees, even when correctly quoting the law, as in this case, often perverted it, which they were doing in this case by misusing it to justify personal, private retaliation or revenge, which was a violation of the very law they quoted, Lev.19:18; Prov.24:17-19; Rom.12:17-19; 13:4; Heb.10:30.
 - d. In Vv.39-42 Jesus responds revealing that:
 - (1) The law is not placed into our hands, but taken out of them
 - (2) The very God who placed that law and its execution where it belongs, into the hands of civil government, also places another law and its execution into the hearts of his disciples, the law of love.
 - (3) This is our law of love, that when we are wronged, if it is not a matter to rightly be taken before the courts, it requires patience, forbearance, even willingness to forego our rights and suffer wrong, so that the courts may not need to step in.
 - (4) This explains the illustrations of non-resistance that is due to love.
 - e. He is still not comparing or contrasting the law and the gospel.
6. The 6th instance, Vv.43-48 – is the case of loving even your enemies.
- a. Here again, It is a case of, “Ye have heard that it hath been said,” and not, “Ye have read.”
 - b. In this case the Pharisees are guilty of adding to the law the words, “and hate thine enemy”; for the law taught just the opposite, Exo.23:4,5; Prov.24:17; 25:21; Rom.12:20,21.
 - c. Jesus’ response in Vv.44-48 teaches them and us to love even our enemies, and exposes the Pharisees kind of righteousness as no righteousness at all, and places them in the same class or category with the publicans whom they believed to be completely unacceptable to God.
 - d. Vv.45-48 teach that:
 - (1) As sons of God the disciples must be like the Father.
 - (2) We are to make God our model of thought and action and to follow him in spirit and in truth, even with reference to our enemies.
 - (3) It is incorrect to think that the goal of loving our enemies is too high for us.
 - (4) Love in this case means and involves “active good will” toward our enemies. Cf. Rom.12:20-21.

(From these six instances Jesus has defined their righteousness in the negative as no righteousness at all.

(No wonder he said to his disciples, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

(For our righteousness to exceed theirs, it must be true, genuine righteousness)

C. ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE IDENTIFYING AND EXPOSING THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE PHARISEES.

1. Mt.14:1-14; Mk.7:1-13 – they were willfully blind followers and observers of human tradition, the tradition of the elders, with greater veneration than the precepts of Almighty God.
2. They often acted the hypocrite. That is:
 - a. They “said and did not,” Mt.23:1-4.
 - b. They did their works to be seen of men, Mt.23:5-7.
 - c. They honored God with their lips, but were far from God in their hearts, Mk.7:6.
3. They strictly bound (i.e., they insisted upon precision obedience to) some parts of the law of God, but carelessly omitted other parts, or passed over other parts of the law, Mt.23:23; Lk.11:42.

III. CONCLUSION

1. There are some common misconceptions about why the Pharisees are so often criticized in our day.
 - a. Some people seem to think they were an altogether wicked, corrupt and vile people. To the contrary, they were generally moral and upright people. Cf. Saul of Tarsus as an example
 - b. Then there are those who have the concept that they were criticized in Jesus’ day and still in our day because they were too strict in keeping God’s law.
 - c. But no matter how close you examine the N.T. record they are never found being criticized because they were too strict in keeping God’s law.
 - d. That for which they were condemned rather severely consisted in three or four evils, generally because:
 - (1) They strictly bound (insisted upon precision obedience to some parts of the law and omitted other parts, or passed over other parts of the law, Mt.23:23; Lk.11:42.

- (2) They often acted the hypocrite. That is:
 - (a) They “said and did not,” Mt.23:1-4.
 - (b) They did their works to be seen of men, Mt.23:5-7.
 - (c) They honored God with their lips, but were far from God in their hearts, Mk.7:6.
- (3) They observed human tradition, the tradition of the elders, with greater veneration than the precepts of Almighty God, Mt.15:1-9; Mk.7:1-13.
- (4) They contented themselves with the external part of duty, without giving due and proper regard to minding the spiritual sense.

2. Lessons we should learn from the Pharisees.

- a. There is no excuse for the evils seen among them or us, but let us not be guilty of misjudging them or anyone else!
- b. Neither they, nor anyone else ever stands or should ever be condemned because they obey God too strictly.
- c. They and all others, including you and me, stand and should be condemned, if we are guilty of insisting on strict obedience of some of God’s laws while omitting obeying other parts of God’s law. Cf. Jas.2:10.
- d. Consequently, a practical lesson we should learn from the Pharisees is that we abide strictly in God’s laws for us without wavering, with no additions, no subtractions, and no substitutions, at the same time avoiding the evils of pretense, the devastation of hypocrisy, and/or doing our works to be seen of men.

3. Let us not worry about being branded as a Pharisee because we plead for genuine faith and strict obedience to God’s laws. For those who would make such an accusation demonstrate thereby their ignorance of the real nature of Phariseism and that they need to examine their own attitude lest they become or have already become unconcerned about obeying God!