

## More Righteous Than The Pharisees?

Living a Righteous Life

John O. Reid (1930-2016)

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When we first came into the church because of all the physical changes we had to make in our lives—keeping the Sabbath, holy days, watching sunset times, tithing, reading labels on all food items—because of all this, our initial approach to God was highly physical.

Then I ran across a scripture in Matthew 5 that made me feel further behind than ever:

**Matthew 5:20** Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

I was struggling to change my life physically, my thinking and my actions, and seemed to be so far behind, how could I possibly exceed the righteousness of these careful, learned men?

Then I read in *Barnes' Notes* that they were false and that they have vain traditions. They follow the written law but also place great value on supposed tradition that came down from Moses. They fasted twice a week, on Thursday when they supposed Moses ascended mount Sinai, and again on Monday when he supposedly descended. In general they were a corrupt, hypocritical, office-seeking, haughty class of men with few exceptions.

Yet, Jesus tells the multitudes, and His disciples to listen to them.

**Matthew 23:1-3** Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

He brings out that the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat and have been given the authority and responsibility to teach and explain the law. "Therefore, all that is consistent with the law of Moses, all the commands, which they properly explain to you, obey." But, He adds this caveat, "They instruct you, but their lives don't correspond with their teaching. Because of this, listen to their instructions, but don't follow their examples."

Then Jesus continues to describe the Pharisees and give instruction.

**Matthew 23:4-12** For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Then Jesus addresses the Pharisees. He addresses them and He lists the eight woes that describe their problems.

I will paraphrase some of the following verses from Matthew 23:13-28.

Verse 13: They would not teach the doctrines of Christ, but taught their traditions, and therefore prevented many who might have come to Christ, from coming.

Verse 14: They would talk the poor into allowing them to manage their finances, and then take advantage of the situation. Their prayers lasted up to three hours at times.

Verse 15: They scoured foreign lands to find proselytes not for God, but for their brand of religion. These proselytes were referred to by the Jews as scabs, and exhibited greater hatred toward Jesus than the Jews. They were sworn enemies of the gospel.

Verse 16: Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, and they held the gold of the temple to be of more value than the temple and what it stood for.

Verse 23: They scrupulously tithed of mint, anise, and cumin but omitted honest justice for the people, mercy, compassion, and kindness toward the poor. Carefulness in small things should be done, but the higher intents of God's laws should not have been forgotten.

Verse 25: The Pharisees continually washed the outside, wanting to appear clean, but

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never cleaned the inside person.

Verses 27-28: The sepulchers, or tombs, were painted white that no man would touch them and be defiled. So they appeared clean, but inside they were full of dead men's bones. Even so the Pharisees outwardly appeared righteous, but inside they were full of hypocrisy.

**Matthew 23:29-33** Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?

What was their righteousness? They knew, and for the most part understood the law, and were able to teach it, but it was superficial; they never felt it was important enough to live by the depth of the law. Why was this not good enough in God's sight? They did not live what they knew to be correct, and because of this as Christ said they were hypocrites, and their pretended righteousness was useless.

Jesus Christ wants us to see the contrast of those who trust in themselves, and those who trust in God.

**Luke 18:9-12** Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

Here, the Pharisee is stating all that he had accomplished, and on this basis he expected the favor of God. His was an address *to* God, it was not a prayer, and to top it all off, he was pleased with the publican's "badness." He gave the appearance of real religion. He did not state that he had made himself better than others, and was willing to acknowledge that it was God who had done it, and that God was entitled to his gratitude for it.

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He fasted twice a week in addition to the public days of fasting. This therefore made it a matter of merit because it was voluntary. He tithed of everything he possessed, and he prided himself very much in this area, and he had the appearance of great piety, and thus he could not see that he was indeed missing the important things God wanted from him, and from all of mankind. The lesson is that because he contrasted himself with others—trusting himself that he was righteous—his fault consisted that in relying on this sort of righteousness and not acknowledging that he was a sinner not seeking the intent of the law to regulate his actions, he foolishly made public professions of his own greatness, which displeased God who looks on the heart, and who sees what an individual is inside, even though his external actions may appear wonderful and good.

But what about the tax collector?

On the surface, the positions of the Pharisee, and the tax collector might be envied by the average man. The Pharisee had authority and position, and those that collected taxes had authority and wealth.

**Luke 19:1-9** Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham.

The tax collectors were not poor.

**Luke 18:13-14** And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat 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 everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Here we see the publican's address to God which was the reverse of the Pharisee's. It was as full of humility and humiliation as the Pharisee's was full of pride and pretension; it was as full of repentance for sin and desire toward God, as the Pharisee's was full of confidence in himself and his own righteousness and sufficiency.

The publican expressed his repentance and humility in what he did, and his gesture. When he begins his prayer he expressed great seriousness and humility and the attitude of a broken spirit and an obedient heart—a heart that truly wanted to be obedient to God. He stood afar off while the Pharisee stood as high as possible, to the upper end of the court; the publican kept at a distance because of his sense of unworthiness to draw close to God, and perhaps for fear of offending the Pharisee who was looking down on him.

He did not lift his eyes or hands to God, but smote himself in utter frustration of allowing the sin that he committed. If he could have struck his heart, the seat of the problem that caused the sin, he would have. His attitude was as the apostle Paul when he said in Romans 7, "O wretched man that I am! Who can save me? And as David said in Psalm 51, "Against you only have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight!" This was the attitude of the publican. It was entirely different.

His prayer was short, because fear and shame hindered him saying very much. He sighed and he groaned. He trusted that, as it states in Romans 8:26, that the Spirit helps in our weaknesses, for we at times do not just know what we should pray. But the Spirit itself makes intercession for our groanings, which cannot be uttered, because it searches the heart and knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because it makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

This was how he prayed, brethren. His comparison was not to other men, his comparison was to God, and he saw his flaws and how much he needed to be healed.

He concluded by asking God to be merciful to him, a sinner, and he went to his home justified, while the Pharisee did not.

We now begin to see that to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees is much more than seeing where they fell short. We must indeed study diligently to know what is true and what is expected of us, and we must live what we know to be true! Our righteousness must be genuine!

But does Jesus just take us this far, or does He give us a way of greatly exceeding the

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righteousness of the Pharisees?

**Matthew 5:17** Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill [to add depth and understanding to the law].

Right after we are told that our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, we are given instructions that guide us in the right direction. Throughout the remainder of the Beatitudes, Jesus amplifies the commandments of God from the letter to the spirit or intent of the law, basically giving us, and the Pharisees, a new dimension to consider, a true course to follow to the Kingdom of God.

In the last two verses of Matthew 7, "When Jesus had finished speaking, the people were astonished at His teachings, for He taught them as one having authority, not as one of the scribes [or Pharisees]." (Matthew 7:28-29)

Jesus gave the Pharisees the solution to their problem, if they were wise enough to listen to Him.

**Matthew 22:34-36** But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

The Pharisees were gathered together, pleased that the Sadducees had been silenced, and were planning a new snare to try and confound Him, or to test His knowledge of the law. They sought the most difficult question they could come up with, and selected a lawyer or scribe who was skilled in the law to present the question to Jesus. As to the question of which was the great commandment, because of the picky, legalistic mindset of the Pharisees, it was something continually argued over. Was it washings, circumcision, respecting sacrifice and purifying? To the Pharisees, the idea of a simple, beautiful, inspiring concept escaped them.

Then Jesus gave them the statement that could have turned their thinking around, if only they could have accepted it. Jesus told them to love the Lord their God with all their heart, with all their soul, and all their mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Here Jesus told them to put God first in their lives, rather than the organization that they had set up. He was telling them to love God supremely more than all other beings and

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systems, with true ardor and trust in Him.

He tells them to love God with all their heart, with their lives in serving Him, and with all their mind, submitting their intellect to His will, and to love His gospel and law more than we do our own minds. And be willing to submit all their faculties to His teaching and guidance. Then He erases all the petty arguments they had over which is the greatest law by telling them, "This is the first and the great commandment, the absolute greatest of all."

And then Jesus gave them the second greatest commandment that they had not asked for. He told them, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." As the question, "Who is my neighbor?" was asked and answered in Luke 10:37, we see that every man is our neighbor. And like the Samaritan we should extend mercy and kindness to them.

Then Jesus goes on to say that on these two commandments hangs the whole law. They are the base, the foundation, and the intent behind all the law.

Brethren, as we live in this end time society and view the world around us—some of whom do not believe in God; some who believe in Christmas and Easter; some who worship trees and rocks, and some of them who do not care about anything—it is easy, because of this, to become a great deal like the Pharisees if we are not very careful.

You see, we have been given the truth, a commodity this world does not have. And we, as the Pharisee, can have the mental attitude of thinking, "I'm glad I'm not as that publican or sinner," when dealing with the world around us.

And as the Pharisee and publican prayed, we also, if we are not careful, can subconsciously feel superior as did the Pharisee, rather than acting as the publican, and measuring ourselves against God, not our fellow man who has not had the privilege of being called as we have.

What other attributes did the Pharisee display? He was judgmental and there was no compassion, mercy, or forgiveness in him.

**James 2:1-13** My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," have you not shown

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partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

We, in the church, must be careful not to exhibit the attitude of passing judgment on others in the church without considering the road they have traveled. Many times, those who do not have this or that particular problem, will feel free to state, "All they have to do is quit smoking, it's not hard." But for that person, it may be very hard.

And in our families, and marriages we must practice mercy and forgiveness, forgetting past mistakes, and going forward with love and kindness. As church members, we are to love all the brethren as a part of our family, not holding any grudges, but truly mending any broken fences, and taking the steps to do that.

Jesus Christ has a great deal to say to us all about this type of attitude.

**Matthew 18:21-35** Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii;



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and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. [And this is the lesson:] Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So [more of the lesson:] My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

In the opening remarks by Albert Barnes, he mentioned that the Pharisees separated themselves from the people. Thus there was no fellowship, encouragement, or two-way conversations.

I know that we have one man, that attends this congregation, that travels 300 miles each week to attend, and a family that travels 160 miles round trip every single week. In this end time the church is scattered, and with the high cost of gas, perhaps many feel it is more prudent to remain at home and stream. But we might all consider what it states in Hebrews regarding attending and fellowshiping on the Sabbath, if at all possible.

**Hebrews 10:23-25** Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

It is extremely important that we fellowship, but the Pharisees could not see this. They could not comprehend that they would be judged by any other standards than strict law keeping.

In John 15:12 Jesus commands us that we love one another as He has loved us, and He states it again, in verse 17, "These things I command you, that you love one another."

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The Pharisees did not have any real love, they did not have any real concern for the people. This is something that we must have.

**Galatians 5:13-16** For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

**Galatians 6:10** Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

What does Jesus look for in our actions?

**Mark 9:41** For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, truly I say unto you he shall not lose His reward.

Jesus Christ is astutely aware of our kindness and our concern to one another. Here we have the simple act of serving a drink of water to the disciples, or of any of God's people, and it will not be forgotten by God. This shows love and kindness.

The final example is in Matthew 25, and this gives a very clear picture of the end of those who show love and kindness, and the end of those who refuse to show that love and kindness or who do not see it as important.

**Matthew 25:31-39** When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying,

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'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

Many in the Church of the Great God show this kindness and concern, by sending cards to those who are sick or discouraged. People all over the world receive cards of encouragement. God is appreciative of that.

**Matthew 25:40** And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

That is how personal showing love and kindness and mercy is to one another, because we show it to Jesus Christ. This is what it is all about.

**Matthew 25:41** Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Brethren, Jesus raised the standard far above what the Pharisees could conceive of, and as we honestly try to fulfill that standard with serious prayer, study, fasting, meditation, with obedience and righteous works, we can be confident and assured that our righteousness, with God's help will indeed exceed that of the Pharisees.