

Righteousness in Action

Knowing what we already know about salvation through faith alone in God's grace alone, which is ours only because of all-atoning work and person of Jesus Christ alone, Jesus' warning that "*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*" makes perfect sense to our ears. There's nothing alarming here. We know that Jesus isn't teaching works-righteousness with these words. He's not commanding us to "outrighteous" the Pharisees in an attempt to earn our way into heaven, which would be *impossible* because these guys were the absolute pillars of society and the pinnacles of what it meant to be "good and holy." These guys had a "civic righteousness" that blew everyone else out of the water. Even the great and mighty Oprah can't hold a candle to the scribes and Pharisees when it comes to the *righteousness of good works and right living*. If entrance into the kingdom of heaven was based on good works, then the Pharisees would have the seats of honor, Oprah would be at the kiddy table, and schlepps like me wouldn't stand a chance of even getting in the door.

But... that's not what our Lord is teaching here when He warns that our righteousness **must** exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, or else we'll **never** get into heaven. You know that salvation isn't a result of works. It's a result of faith alone in God's grace alone because of the all-atoning work of Christ alone. The righteousness that grants us entry into heaven isn't a righteousness based on our works. Scripture is clear on that. *Our works avail us not*. Rather, the righteousness that ushers us into heaven—true saving righteousness—is Christ alone. *He* is our righteousness; our justification. *He* is our salvation. Our faith holds fast to Him and His perfect righteousness. What Jesus is so plainly saying with these words is that unless our righteousness is grounded in Christ alone and His righteousness, we will **never** enter the kingdom of heaven. Even the "best of the best" like the Pharisees will **never** enter the kingdom of heaven *if Jesus Christ isn't their righteousness*. Faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. It's so simple.

And yet... there is another danger here, and Jesus addresses it. It's the danger of swinging to the opposite extreme of works-righteousness; *the danger of being content with and only striving for the "bare minimums."* What's the cut-off line for entry into heaven? Bare-minimum faith shoots for and is content with that. **This is a problem.** Does our Lord not desire that we strive for greatness of faith? What does your Lord have to say about lazy servants and lukewarm faith? (Hint: He has a lot to say on these matters, and it's never flattering.) "*Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*"

“*Least in the kingdom of heaven....*” That doesn’t sound so bad, does it? **“Least in the kingdom of heaven” is still in heaven, right? As long as I’m in; that’s all that matters!** Yes, to be in heaven is very good, and if you happen to be the least in the kingdom of heaven, **you won’t care.** You won’t be bummed out. You will have one-hundred percent joy and bliss. You will rejoice because all your focus, along with everyone else, will be on Christ. But bear in mind that your Lord isn’t praising the *desire* to be least in the kingdom of heaven. ***In fact, He’s doing just the opposite.*** He’s encouraging the faithful to strive to be great in the kingdom of heaven. They are not to be content with last place. Your Lord doesn’t praise a faith that strives only for the bare minimums and shoots for last place. Such a faith is always in danger.

What do I mean? How many times have you heard it said, *“I love Jesus. I absolutely love Jesus. I just don’t have to go to church every week (or ever). So what if I don’t get the kids baptized or I haven’t had Holy Communion in months/years? So what if I don’t pray or read my Bible. Jesus knows my heart.”* ***Is that not a loosening of God’s Word and commandments?*** *“Yeah, but I still call Jesus ‘Lord!’”* No one said you didn’t, but... can you honestly say that He’s your Lord if you’re the one calling all the shots? Can you honestly call Him ‘Lord’ if you’ve made yourself and your desires gods over Him? More than that, as He Himself warns, *“Not all who say ‘Lord, Lord’ will be saved.”* *“Lord, Lord did we not do all these great works in your name and say all the right things? What gives?! Let us in!”* To which Jesus responds, *“Go away. I don’t know you.”*

Folks: What is the dividing line? What’s the cut-off line for bare minimum entry into heaven? ***When does “least in the kingdom of heaven” cross over into “unknown and locked out where there is only darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth”?*** It’s a fine line and a slippery slope indeed, and I am so very thankful that I am not tasked with rendering judgment/verdict. Understand: When I lay all this out, I’m not doing it so as to scare you into doing works and bearing fruits that will—***hopefully***—be enough to keep the fires of hell at bay and push you over the threshold and into heaven. That’s just another form of Pharisaical works-righteousness, and it’s **wrong**—plain and simple. Besides, you could get that sermon anywhere else around town today.

Let’s come at this a different way. You know the Truth of your sin and the wage that sin justly deserves. You know how an eternity’s worth of good works could **never** cover adequate reparation for even one single sin, let alone a lifetime worth of them. You also know the Truth of your ***all-availing righteousness***; the Truth that is Christ Jesus, your righteousness, your justification, your salvation. You know how your God and Lord gave up all of heaven’s majesty to come to this fallen and sinful world and take on flesh, ***all for your sake.*** He took on flesh for the sole purpose of taking that flesh to a bloody cross in order to suffer God’s just

and righteous wrath against sin... *your sin*. He went to that cross and gave up **EVERYTHING** for you and for your eternal salvation. He gave up everything, not so that you would be called least in heaven, but so that you could be called *a son/daughter of the Most High*. That [*the crucifix*] is how much God loves you! God didn't do the bare minimums. This is as big as it gets! God died for you!

And how does faith rightly respond to this free and unmerited gift of all-availing, blood-bought righteousness? What is the *reflex-response of faith* to God and His undeserved mercy and grace? Luther sums it up perfectly in the meaning to the first article of the Apostles' Creed. "*For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.*" Thank, praise, serve, and obey. Honestly: In light of this [*the crucifix*], should such thankfulness and praise need to be coerced? *It's not like God gave you socks or corduroys for your birthday*. He's given you mercy, grace, and complete forgiveness! He's given you the unconditional and unmerited gift of eternal life, not because you've earned any of it, but solely because He loves you. *What part of faith is content to offer up the bare minimums of thankfulness and praise in return for all this?!* In response to all this [*crucifix, baptism, Holy Communion*], how could I be content with half-hearted service and obedience?! "*Meh... good enough. God knows I care. At least I'm not like those other people, who are way worse!*" The Pharisees couldn't have said it any better.

Folks: Believe it or not, but your Lord wants you to strive for **greatness of faith**. There's **nothing** works-righteous about it. Works avail you nothing, **BUT... faith without works is no faith at all. It's dead**. "*Show me your faith apart from your works, and I'll show you my faith by my works.*" Your Lord wants you to strive to be the very best child of God you can be, **not in order to be saved, but out of the joy you are saved**. He never praises or calls for half-hearted, lukewarm, bare minimums. As I said before, it's true that some will be least in the kingdom of heaven, and—yes—we give thanks that they're still in heaven, but this should **never** be the Christian's goal/desire. We strive to be the greatest.

And what does greatness look like on this side of the kingdom of heaven? It looks like **humility**. Greatness in Christ is a race to the bottom. The greatest Christians lower themselves and make themselves the servants of all, serving the least of those whom Christ loved enough to die for, **never seeking their own glory/fame, but doing it all to the glory of God in humble, repentant thanksgiving for all that He's done for them in Christ**. "*Greater love hath no one than this, that someone should lay down His life for His friends.*" "*If anyone is to be first/greatest, they must be least of all and servant of all.*"

That's how we end for today, with all the focus on the cross of Christ; the One who became the **absolute, God-forsaken least** so that we may be made great and holy in the sight of our God and Father; sons and daughters of the Most High.

May these truly good/righteous works of Christ, our Righteousness, [*crucifix and sacraments*] be your joy, your peace, and the reason for all that you say, think, and do as you live out your faith and respond to His great love for you by loving and serving all those around you.

To Him be all the glory, all the praise, and all the honor... **AMEN.**