

Grace and peace to you . . .

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks this sentence of the Law: "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." [Mt 5:20] The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was impressive. They were highly disciplined and lived in strict accordance with the Laws of Moses and even with other, only man-made laws. It was rare to find a scribe or a Pharisee outwardly breaking the Law—stealing, murdering, neglecting his daily prayers, cursing, and so on. When Jesus says to those gathered to hear Him that the only way they can enter the kingdom of heaven is if their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, it is like saying to the ninety pound weakling, "Your strength and fighting ability must exceed that of the Green Berets." It is an outrageous requirement and it speaks condemnation upon those who hear. Jesus calls common people, even as He calls you, to become more righteous, to keep the Law more fully, than the elite Pharisees.

Then He goes on to explain how this is to be done—not by mere outward keeping of the Law but by inward keeping of it as well. You are not merely to refrain from murder, but also from hate, and not only from hate, but also from insults. You are not only to behave perfectly, but also be above reproach, even false reproach. You are to seek reconciliation even with false accusers. In this Sermon on the Mount, Christ continues this line of thought, explaining the real meaning of the Law with stricter laws against lust and divorce and so on. That to which He calls you is nothing short of perfection. Unless you are perfect, far more perfect than the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. And if you fail in these commands you will be prosecuted and punished to the full degree, not leaving hell's prison until you have paid every last penny, which is to say: never.

Hard words, indeed. And under such demands who could enter the kingdom of heaven, except Christ, the One who came from heaven? If you had delusions that you were good, that you were righteous, if the world counted you as good and upright and decent like the world counted the scribes and Pharisees, let this word of Christ be your wake-up call. You have not been good enough. No matter how decent you think yourself deep down to be, you have failed. You have not kept the Law in your heart. Your base desires and the secret yearning of your hearts are no better than that of the vilest criminal in the hardest prison in the world. According to your thoughts and wants you are a murderer, an adulterer, a thief, a braggart, a pompous fool, an idolater, and a blasphemer. You are all of this and more, because the old, fallen nature is still within you, and your heart is black as soot on account

of it. Worse yet, like those whom St. Peter addressed in Acts chapter two, you are guilty of nothing less than the unjust murder of the Son of God.

It was this realization that caused the prophet Isaiah in the presence of God to cry out: “Woe to me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.” [Isa 6:5]; and likewise St. Peter to exclaim, as you heard last week, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” [Lk 5:8]; and St. Paul also to say: “I am the chief of sinners.” [1Ti 1:15] In the same way those hearing St. Peter’s sermon in Acts chapter two were cut to the heart and responded: “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” [37] Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” [38-9]

This is the answer likewise for you. What shall you do, for like Isaiah, according to your works, you are undone. Hear the inspired words of St. Peter: “Repent and be baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins!” [Act 2:38] Yet you say, “But I’ve already been baptized. What do I do now?” Don’t you know that if you were baptized, you were baptized into Christ’s death and raised again to new life in His resurrection? Turn away from your sin, fight against the flesh, and rest in the everlasting grace of Christ Jesus, who gives you full pardon and absolution. Your baptism was not an empty symbol or ritual, but is your connection into the death of Jesus Christ, whose righteousness does exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. His righteousness is bestowed upon you through the gift of the Holy Spirit, given in Holy Baptism; and that gift is faith. The death that Christ died (the death into which you are baptized) He died to sin once for all, and the life that He lives He lives to God for you. Sin then does not have dominion over you, because you are dead to sin. You are not under the Law, but under grace!

You have been baptized for life. Your baptism is not a past event. Your baptism is a present reality. Your baptism constantly defines who you are before God. You stand, on the one hand, convicted of sin like Isaiah, but on the other hand, also like Isaiah, as one who has been cleansed by the burnt offering of the Paschal Lamb sacrificed on God’s own holy altar, the Lamb of God who touches your lips in Holy Communion. Your old name—the name of death—has been taken away. Instead, you have been given God’s own Name—the name of eternal life: “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Into this Name you have been baptized. You have been separated from death by being joined to Christ’s death, so that you are cut off from the devil, and claimed by God with His own promise, the promise

which is for you and your children, the promise of the Law fulfilled and sins forgiven. You are no longer under the Law, but now live under grace.

And in that Triune Name the great exchange has taken place: Christ Jesus, in perfect obedience to all that the Law requires, according to His own holy will took on your sin and became sin, and then allowed the Law to do all that Justice requires of the sinner. He suffered Hell in your place. And at the same time, according to this great exchange in His Name, He gave to you all that is His: His holiness, His obedience, His righteousness which exceeds by far that of the scribes and Pharisees! Here is the gate to the kingdom of heaven, nothing other than Christ Himself. There is no other way to get this righteousness. The Law can only condemn, but this Good News, this Gospel of God's saving love in Christ IS the power of God unto salvation.

Into this Christ you have been baptized, on this Christ you are fed in the Holy Supper, by this Christ you are forgiven, redeemed, blessed, and saved! Thanks be to God, for the righteousness of Jesus Christ is your righteousness and heaven stands wide open to you. You are baptized into Christ. You are dead indeed to sin. You are alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes . . .