

“Disciples Have the Righteousness of Christ”

Matthew 5:20

Webster’s dictionary defines a “need” as something that a person must have, something that is necessary in order to live or to be successful or to be happy. Type the word “need” in your Google search engine, and you will see where it yields some 5.4 billion results, indicating to me that our needs occupy much of our thinking.

The greatest need in your life right now is not what you think it is. Ask someone about what they perceive to be their greatest need and you will have a variety of answers, such as:

- I’m unemployed; therefore my greatest need is to find a job
- I’m lonely; therefore my greatest need is to find a mate
- I’m discouraged; therefore my greatest need is to find happiness
- I’m sick; therefore my greatest need is to find healing

Jesus meets us at our greatest point of need. He satisfies the hungry, encourages the lonely, and empowers the weak. However, your greatest need is not what you think it is. Your greatest need is for personal righteousness.

Matthew 6:33 - “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

We often focus on “all these things” while neglecting what Jesus commanded.

Context shows us that Jesus was teaching His disciples to live radically different than those who don’t know God. Those who don’t know God are concerned with perceived needs in their life. Jesus says that His followers seek first “kingdom of God,” or His sovereign rule in their life, as well as His righteousness in their life. When these two things are being sought in my life, Jesus says everything else will be taken care of.

In many ways, when we focus on our perceived needs, all we do is deal with symptoms and not the root issue. The needs of my life are designed to drive me to the cross where my greatest need is met in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

My greatest need is for righteousness. This is what Jesus deals with here in verse 20:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

In this verse, Jesus deals with the subject of righteousness and He shatters our thinking about the nature of true righteousness.

1. The PROBLEM of self-righteousness

This would have been an extremely shocking statement to those listening to Jesus. In their first century minds, none were more devout and externally righteous than their religious leaders.

Jesus says that a greater righteousness is necessary.

The Pharisees and religious leaders had taken God's Law and reduced it down to something that they themselves could manage. Their approach was very superficial and focused only on externals.

This is illustrated by a parable that Jesus told in Luke 18.

Luke 18:9-14 - "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: God, I thank you that I am not like others men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up 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, but the one who humbled himself will be exalted."

In Jewish society during those days, nobody was despised more so than tax collectors who had compromised their Jewish heritage and sold out to Rome. Their fellow Jews held them in very low esteem. In many ways, they had to be corrupt because their job required them to collect taxes for Rome while making a living for themselves by lying about the amount of those taxes required.

The Pharisee was upheld as a model of virtue in the Jewish mind. In fact, it was even said during those days, "If only two people go to heaven, one will be a scribe and the other a Pharisee."

There was no one who was more "righteous" than a Pharisee. The word itself means "to be separate." The Pharisees were convinced that God was obligated to them because of their own good works.

In the Luke 18 parable, Jesus confronts that way of thinking by saying that the tax collector was the one who went home justified rather than the Pharisee. Despite his sinfulness and his many failings, the tax collector would be justified by God because of his repentance and faith. The Pharisee, despite all of his outward piety and religious appearance, would be condemned because he really trusted in himself.

Jesus' favorite word that He used in reference to the Pharisees was the word "hypocrite."

"Hypocrite" - *used to refer to an actor in a Greek play who put on a false front; pretended to be something for a show*

Jesus uses this word seven times in Matthew 23 to refer to the Pharisees.

Hypocrisy is a shabby substitute for holiness.

The "RMS Queen Mary" was an ocean liner and the largest of its kind to cross the seas when it was launched in 1936. During World War II the ship was converted into a military transport ship that carried soldiers back and forth throughout the duration of the war. The ship roamed the high seas for more than forty years until she was finally retired, anchored as a floating hotel and museum in Long Beach, California.

While the ship was being converted, her three massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repainted. But something totally unforeseen happened. While on the dock the smokestacks crumbled. Nothing was left of the 3/4 inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that remained were more than thirty coats of paint that had been applied and reapplied over the years. All of the steel had rusted away.

Matthew 23:28 - **"So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."**

When Jesus said this to the Pharisees, He meant they had no substance to them, only an exterior appearance or facade. A thin layer of external paint of religiosity doesn't cut it when God requires the inward steel of righteousness.

J.C Ryle - *"Of all the mischievous delusions that keep men out of heaven, of all the soul-destroying snares that Satan employs to oppose Christ's gospel, there is none we find so dangerous, none so successful, as self-righteousness!"*

Self-righteousness is concerned with appearances more than it is with attitudes.

Self-righteousness is concerned with the applause of men rather than the approval of God.

The problem with self-righteousness:

- God demands transformation of heart, something of which a person is not capable of doing themselves
- It rationalizes God's law and makes it into something it was never intended to be
- Self-glorifying rather than Savior-glorifying
- It is human and not divine

In order for us to make it to heaven, Jesus says that self-righteousness can't get us there. Our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

“Exceeds” - *means to abound; was used to refer to a river that had overflowed its banks*

So when Jesus says that a greater righteousness is needed than Pharisee righteousness, He means that much more righteousness is required than anyone could ever come up with or accomplish by himself.

It means that Jesus requires a righteousness that far exceeds and surpasses even the best that man can come up with.

Matthew 5:48 - **“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

Life in the kingdom means that we must be as holy as the King is Himself. Given our sinfulness, how, then, is this even possible?

2. The PROVISION of true righteousness

Jesus says that without a greater righteousness, there can be no entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Yet man is without righteousness. He is bankrupt in that department. So what does God do? He solves the problem through the gift of His Son.

This is the purpose of the Law.

Galatians 3:24 - **“Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”**

Martin Luther - *“The Law must be laid upon those that are to be justified, that they may be shut up in the prison thereof, until the righteousness of faith comes--that, when they are cast down and humbled by the Law, they should fly to Christ. The Law humbles them, not to their*

destruction, but to their salvation. For God woundeth that He may heal again. He killeth that He may quicken again.”

The law could save nobody. No person was ever saved by the keeping of the law. Yet we cannot circumvent the law, for the law shows us God’s standard of perfection and exposes our sinfulness. It points us to the only hope we have of salvation--the Lord Jesus Christ!

We need Christ’s righteousness, for only He is truly righteous.

Romans 3:20-28 - “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

This passage is one of great encouragement and hope for us because it shows us how Jesus Christ did what we could never do--He fulfilled the demands of the Law.

Through faith in Jesus Christ we are declared righteous. Thus, God gives us the righteousness that He requires.

This is the message of the cross. Without it we are doomed to swim in a quagmire of empty and meaningless moralisms.

As a Pharisee himself, no one had been more externally righteous than Paul before his salvation. This is the testimony he gave:

Philippians 3:7-9 - “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness

of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”

Living, He loved me. Dying, He saved me. Buried, He carried my sins far away. Rising, He justified me freely forever. And one day He's coming, O glorious day!

- The law **REQUIRES** righteousness
- The Pharisees **REFLECTED** self-righteousness
- The disciple **RECEIVES** righteousness through faith in Christ

This is why I say that your greatest need is not what you think it is. While you have perceived needs in your life, your greatest need is righteousness.

Philippians 4:19 - “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

A couple of years ago, I remember reading in the news the story of a homeless man named Timothy Gray. Like any other homeless person, Gray was totally broke and lived on the streets while making do with whatever he could find to survive. Unknown to him, he had been named as an heir to a fortune. Gray was a long lost relative of a wealthy New York heiress named Huguette Clark who had named him as an heir to her \$300 million dollar fortune.

However, just barely before he could be found and informed of his fortune, Gray's body was discovered under an overpass where he had fallen asleep and froze to death on a cold December night. He was an heir to riches, but he died in rags.

From God's perspective, man at his very best doesn't have a penny to his name in the righteousness department. Yet God wants to give him an untold fortune in Jesus Christ.

Your greatest need is for righteousness. Your greatest decision is to trust Christ. Your greatest gift will be His perfect righteousness credited to your bankrupt account.