

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

True Righteousness in Christ

Many of you have probably heard the suggestion made that we should just do away with the Old Testament and just rely on the New Testament (and sometimes even just on the Gospels). After all, the Old Testament is full of stories of how God has arranged for the destruction of one people and ordered the conquest of another, and lots of other brutalities. And the Old Testament is so full of rules, and those rules belong to another age and so we can dispense with them. It is a line presented by many critics of Christianity, and even some who would see themselves within it.

Well, it would seem from today's Gospel reading that Jesus, in the Gospels, tells us we cannot do that, or not in his name anyway: 'Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.'

In both the Greek in which Jesus' words were handed down to us, and in the written form of the Hebrew he probably spoke them in, little jots and tittles – the tiniest of marks – can make a significant difference to the meaning of a word, or a small mistake with the pen can change the meaning of a word so much that a perfectly reasonable sentence descends into utter nonsense. And not just the nonsense you get when the preacher isn't very good...

Instead of doing away with the Law, Jesus instructs his followers that even the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is not enough for entry to the kingdom of heaven. You might think getting into the University of Cambridge is hard, but seemingly entry into the kingdom of heaven is even worse!

You see, the scribes and the Pharisees were the groups in the crowd that Jesus was speaking to that were the keenest on the Law. They spent many hours in careful study of every single one of those jots and tittles in the Scriptures that we have come to call the Old Testament. They could certainly tell you if you missed even the slightest pen mark. They were the ones who lived exactly according to what the letter of the Law demanded.

And they did as best as they could to determine what the Law required, working in the best possible faith. These were not the group of scoundrels they are sometimes described as, trying to set up barriers to everyone else getting into heaven – these were wise and careful and faithful men, who knew the Scriptures handed down, they knew the Word of God as it had been received by the people of Israel. They did everything in their power to observe every aspect of the Law God had given them, and because they thought it was for the good of the people, they were happy to do so publicly. Not to shame, but to remind their friends and neighbours that what the Scriptures said really and truly mattered, really and truly made a difference, really and truly shaped how they must live in the world. And they were right in that – just not quite in the way that they thought they were.

So, we can't dispense with the Law, and we cannot achieve sufficient righteousness on our own however well we live within it.

What then?

In Jesus, we see a model of a very different sort of righteousness to the efforts of the scribes and the Pharisees. One not based on behaviour, one not based on rules and regulations, one not based on sacrifices and proper worship even. Instead, in Jesus we see righteousness stemming purely from identity, from personhood, from relationship.

Jesus is righteousness not because he does not sin, but because he is one with his Father in heaven. It is the other way around, Jesus is one with the Father, and therefore Jesus is righteous, and therefore Jesus does not sin. Jesus is righteous because he lives who he is fully. Jesus is righteous because of his loving relationship with his Father.

To ask for us to be righteous then is to ask for us to be like Jesus. For us to be righteous comes not from any good deeds of our own, or from our regularly attending church, or carefully saying our prayers. It comes from Jesus. It comes from entering into a relationship. It comes from becoming friends, brothers, sisters to Jesus.

Jesus places himself in the great and long tradition of God making covenant with God's people, of God setting God's people free. And we can all become part of that people, the people who have that intimate relationship with God.

And it will change our lives. Like with any intimate relationship a human being enters, it cannot leave us unchanged. And so, once we accept the invitation to become children of God, we will begin to let light shine out before all people. Not as a fulfilment of a requirement, but because like we are in ordinary human relationships, we will be changed by the relationship. By this relationship with God in Jesus Christ, we will be transformed into people who shine with the divine light. By this relationship with God in Jesus Christ, we will be transformed into light for the world, not hidden under a bushel, but shining out for all to see, giving light unto all. By this relationship with God in Jesus Christ, we will be transformed into salt for the earth: salt that preserves, that cleanses, that restores. And if we persevere in this relationship, then we will not lose our flavour and need to be cast aside, but we will become those who live as we truly are.

Not one jot or tittle of the Law will have been thrown away, but we will not need it to guide us, for we can know by the love we have for God, and God for us, how to be truly righteous, truly bringers of light. Then will our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and pharisees – not because of our own merits, but because of the One who we know and we love and we live for, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Isaiah 58.1-9a, Matthew 5.13-20*