

# Examine Your Righteousness!

**N**ICK AND JOE HAD BEEN GOOD JEWISH BOYS. Or, at least we can assume they had been. In their youth, they probably longed to be accepted by God and to be like their religious leaders. These “men of God” were the spiritual leaders of the community. The people regarded them as godly men - men to be respected and honored. In order for Nick and Joe to become spiritual leaders, they had to prove they could follow the ritual laws. They were required to apply for admission, and if accepted they had to agree to follow the laws of purity and tithes. But along came Jesus and Nick, that is, Nicodemus and Joe, that is, Joseph of Arimathea, began to wonder about what they had been taught. They may have been present when Jesus said,

*For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. (NASB) Matthew 5:20*

**SURPASS WHO?** How would you have felt if you were present and you were a Pharisee or a scribe. The Pharisees were regarded by the people as the experts in how to apply the Bible to everyday life. The Pharisees had developed the oral law (Halakah) from the scriptures using allegory in order to apply scripture to everyday life. They accepted the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings as the Word of God. They believed scripture was authoritative or binding on men and women. They agreed God was one God and there was life after death (resurrection). They believed in angels, demons and in future punishment. They were the experts in scriptural truth and were the progressives of their day.

Initially, both the Pharisees and the priests wanted the people to be “as righteous as the priests.” So they gave the people religious rules to follow. The Pharisees withdrew from “sinners” in an attempt to be accepted by God. They knew evil was bad. So they withdrew from the diseased, the physically disadvantaged, widows, the gluttonous, drunkards, tax-collectors, and adulterers. What a shock Jesus’ words must have been for any Pharisee who was listening.

Jesus also included the scribes. Both the Pharisees and Sadducees had scribes as part of their sect. It is not clear to whom Jesus is referring. But the scribes were the highly

educated religious leaders. They had to complete a course of study for several years - starting in their youth. Ordination occurred at the age of 40 years at which time they could make their own religious decisions and serve as judge at criminal and civil cases. They were the final authority.

If Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were present, they must have been shocked when Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness surpasses . . . I wonder if they slept that evening.

Our English word “surpass” misses the real meaning of this word. The Greek word is PERISSEUO. It means “to have abundance,” “to lavish,” or “to make over-rich.” Maybe the best five word meaning is “more, more, more, more, and more.” Jesus was saying that unless “your righteousness is more, more, more and more than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you are not going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

What was the response of the crowd? Some may have been discouraged, because there was a Jewish saying, “If only two people go to heaven, one will be a scribe and the other a Pharisee.”

**BAD RIGHTEOUSNESS?** The righteousness or holiness Jesus was rejecting was the righteousness taught by these highly respected leaders. Jesus corrected their false teaching.

He came to fulfill the Law - not destroy it (Matthew 5:17-19). These leaders were destroying scripture by adding and taking away from it. Now the people probably thought Jesus did destroy it because Mark tells us the people said,

**What is this? A new teaching with authority! (NASB) Mark 1:27**

What kind of holiness does Jesus approve? We will discover the answer in the next verse, Matt. 5:21. But for now, we want to ask, "What kind of righteousness was Jesus rejecting?" We find the answer to this question in the gospels. In Matthew 23:14, Jesus rebuked them because they would steal a widow's home and yet make long prayers on the street corners to appear holy (Matt. 6:5). Jesus rebuked them for working hard at small, unimportant details of conduct while being blind to true holiness (Matt. 23:24). Their righteousness was rejected because it had included seeking the favor of the people (Matt. 23:28). Christians do the same today. Have you ever publicly prayed and worried what others thought of your prayer? Some Christians will not pray because they fear rejection. Or, have you ever struggled over "some small things" and ignored Biblical things God wants you to do?

Many Christians today need to hear Jesus' words,

**Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, (NASB) Mark 12:37-38**

We usually focus on the "chief seats" and "places of honor" but did you notice the phrase "respectful greetings?" How often we want someone to praise our good deeds - to recognize our good works - how often are we offended because

someone did not recognize what we did? Or, how about the long robes? The long robe says, "I am a priest, a pastor, a rabbi, an academician, or a religious man." The scribes and Pharisees missed it! The honor, respect and adoration of the common people had replaced their pursuit of God.

Jesus also warned the Pharisees about their neglect of justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23). He rebuked them for adding their oral tradition to the Bible (Mark 7:5). Jesus rebuked them for not really understanding the scriptures and turning away those who wanted to know. Wow!

**NO! NO!** Jesus concluded with "you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus uses the strongest negative possible in the Greek language. He uses a double negative, "you shall no not ever enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus' holiness

is not about what you do on the outside. The scribes and Pharisees thought God was interested in the external. God is more interested about the true person on the inside,

**But the LORD said to Samuel, "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the**

**heart. (NASB) 1 Samuel 16:7**

**CONCLUSION.** Jesus' message to us is that God is more interested about who we are on the inside. That is the message of the beatitudes. Many people strive to serve God or do for God out of fear or to gain His favor. That is how the scribes and Pharisees started. But the Christian already has the favor of God. That is God's grace - "undeserved favor." We are His children (John 1:12) and He is a loving Father who will discipline us when we sin (Heb. 12:4-13). We can never lose His favor. That is what Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea found. John 19:38-39 tells us they became disciples of Jesus. Joseph was a secret Christian and apparently Nicodemus became a public one. They found a greater righ-

teous - they found forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.  
And it is God Who changes the inside (Phil. 2:12-13) to  
holiness in order to make the changes on the outside (James  
2:14-26).