



Rev. Chris Taylor - 02.09.2020
"Grace, Mercy and Righteousness"
Psalm 112:1-9 and Matthew 5:13-20

As some of you know, I went to a small college in upstate New York for my undergraduate degree. In the fall of my sophomore year people were talking about an upcoming concert. It featured a guy and his band that I had never heard of, but apparently he was just starting to generate some buzz. A couple of friends asked if I would take tickets at one of the doors and I readily agreed. Why not? I'd be able to hear this guy for free and see if he was any good.

The concert was in the school's chapel which was a small venue. As I remember it, it sat maybe three or four hundred people. I was taking tickets when my friends showed up. They wanted me to let them in even though they didn't have any tickets. This, clearly, was why I had been asked to take tickets in the first place. They were looking for a freebie, and I still remember how surprised and disappointed they looked when I turned them away. To this day I feel badly about it. No one likes to disappoint their friends. Even more, they ended up missing what turned out to be one of the greatest concerts to ever hit our campus: a 25 year old Bruce Springsteen, and his E Street Band.

Now maybe some of you might have handled that differently. Maybe you are thinking that I was a bit too rigid there, too legalistic, and I get that. As my friends pointed out, the concert was general admission, everyone was standing up anyway, so who would be hurt if a few people got in on the sly?

It raises an important question for us, one that I think a lot of us wrestle with at one point or another: can doing the right thing be wrong sometimes? Is it possible that following all the rules might be contrary at times to God's intent?

I was thinking about that this past week as I was studying our text this morning. "Don't think I've come to abolish the law or the prophets," Jesus says, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." Well that seems pretty clear: the law is the law and you better follow it. But right at the end of this section Jesus adds, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

What exactly does that mean? We know that the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time were meticulous about doing exactly what Jesus is talking about: dotting the "i's" and crossing

the “t’s. As William Barclay notes in his commentary, if the Law said there is to be no work on the Sabbath, then they were precise in figuring out exactly what constituted work. For instance, since carrying a burden would be a form of work, then they defined what a burden was:

Scribal Law lays it down that a burden is “food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write a customs house notice upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet...”

All these things were defined as a “burden” – as something you weren’t allowed to carry on the Sabbath. Crazy. Legalistic. But here’s the thing: when Jesus says our righteousness has to exceed these religious leaders is he saying that we need to go even further?

Well if you have spent any time in the Gospels, you know that Jesus was no fan of the scribes and Pharisees. Just consider his seven “woes” that we find in chapter 23:13-36. He calls these religious leaders “children of hell” (v15). He compares them to whitewashed tombs: beautiful on the outside but full of filth within (v.27). “You snakes, you brood of vipers” he says (v. 33), “how can you escape being sentenced to hell?”

Why was Jesus so brutal in his attack? If I was to pick one verse that captured the essence of his opposition it would be v. 23:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

Tithing mint and dill and cumin is taking the requirements of the law to an extreme. How do you figure out precisely one tenth of something so insignificant as a bunch of cumin? It’s ridiculous. But that, as we have already seen, is precisely what these religious leaders were all about: establishing their own righteousness by a strict, unyielding observance of the law.

That’s where they disagreed with Jesus, and Jesus with them. A strict observance of the Sabbath meant no work, and in their minds that would include healing someone who was sick. “Can’t you just wait one more day?” they would say. But for Jesus, that sick person’s need took precedence. For Jesus the law was meant to serve us and not the other way around.

You may have heard about Marc Eugenio and Emily James. Eugenio had recently changed jobs and this past December he deposited his new paycheck into his account at US Bank. The bank put a hold on most of the check as banks do, and Eugenio spent quite a bit of time at a branch office, trying to get access to the money so he could buy Christmas presents for his kids.

On Christmas Eve, Eugenio ended up at a gas station five miles from home on a cold winter day with an empty tank. A bank employee told him the money was going to show up soon, so Eugenio sat there for hours, periodically trying his debit card so he could buy a few gallons and get home. Nothing.

Finally, he called the bank's toll-free number. He ended up talking to a senior officer at the call center named Emily James. Over the course of the next hour James realized the money wasn't going to be released and that Eugenio had been misled. Working in the same city, she offered to drive over and give him some money so that he could get home.

"No, no, no," Eugenio replied. He didn't want her to go to the trouble. But James got permission from her supervisor to use her break to drive over, and the supervisor even gave her \$20 to give the man. "Merry Christmas" James said as she gave Eugenio the money.

Then both James and her manager were fired. In a statement US Bank said, "She broke the rules, putting herself and the bank at unnecessary risk." The bank, it turns out, bars call center workers from meeting customers. Even though James had worked at the bank for two years and received numerous commendations and awards, she was fired on New Year's Eve. She received no severance, and ended up using her last paycheck to buy some food for her two dogs.

The whole incident offers us a glimpse of what it's like to be among the working poor in this country; what it is like to be part of that significant percentage of our population that is living paycheck to paycheck.

Columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote about Eugenio and James in the New York Times which is where I saw their story. Not a good day for US Bank. It could have been just the opposite. It could have been amazing. They could have been out there holding up James and her supervisor and saying, "See how much we care!" That's what Nordstrom's would have done.

Instead, it has turned out to be a pr disaster all because someone in the chain of command couldn't get past the rules. Someone couldn't see the larger picture. Someone thought following the rules was more important than caring for the customers. By following the rules, they got it all wrong.

That's what Jesus is getting at here in our text. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is dotting every "i" and crossing every "t". Jesus isn't saying that's wrong. What he is saying, rather, is that there is something more. There is a higher standard. The righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is that form of obedience which is driven by love. Love, even if it means breaking the rules.

If you want to taste the Kingdom of God, then Jesus has shown us the way. The Law matters. Obedience matters. But if we really want to open our lives to the Kingdom, then ultimately we have to be willing, at times, to move beyond the black and white, legalistic

righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. We have to move into that far more complicated space where we find our way to what is most loving; to what is true and beautiful and just and kind. That's what those religious leaders missed. That, finally, is the spirit behind what the law and prophets are all about.

ⁱ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, (Westminster Press, Phila., 1975), p. 128