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Exceeding the Righteousness of Men

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

Some have maintained that Jesus is saying we need to keep ourselves righteous to enter Heaven, or similarly that we must make ourselves more righteous than the Pharisees to be saved. Is this true? No. Jesus’ point here is that the men His disciples thought were the most righteous people alive were not getting into Heaven, and that men’s righteousness had to exceed man’s “righteousness” to be acceptable to God—an impossible catch 22.

Jesus is saying no one’s “righteousness” is getting them to Heaven, because *“all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment”* (Is. 64:6) compared with God’s righteousness and the requirements of God’s Law. Similarly, when Jesus told His disciples that it was very difficult for rich men to get into Heaven, the disciples *“were very astonished and said, ‘Then who can be saved?’”* (Matt. 19:25). This is because in Jewish tradition, the rich and important were blessed by God for their “righteous” lives, for *“the righteous will be rewarded with prosperity”* (Pro. 13:21). Once again, Jesus was saying that men living “righteous” lives could not be saved on the merits of their righteous works—*“with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”* (Matt. 19:26b ESV).

In another way, Jesus told His disciples *“that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart”* (Matt. 5:28). Remember that the penalty for adultery was death under the Law. So, is Jesus saying here that I have to make *“a covenant with my eyes”* (Job 31:1b) and try really hard not to look at women with

lust or else I’m worthy of death? Yes and no. Jesus’ point was that every man is guilty of breaking the Law and committing sin and is worthy of death—every man is guilty of fornication or adultery in their hearts before God’s eyes. No man can keep his heart from sin. Jesus was not establishing a new law for us to live by to be righteous—He was disqualifying every man from Heaven by revealing that their sin-natures condemned them to death because they could not keep themselves righteous in God’s eyes by God’s Law. As *“Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness”* (Rom. 10:5), but *“there is none righteous, not even one”* (Rom. 3:10), because no one can keep the whole Law—*“for whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all”* (James 2:10)—we are all guilty of breaking the Law.

I cannot make *“a covenant with my eyes”* (Job 31:1b) and keep myself righteous because even though I desire righteousness, *“I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate”* (Rom. 7:15) because of my sin nature *“of flesh, sold into bondage to sin”* (Rom. 7:14b). I am *“a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Rom. 7:23b-25a), Who made it possible that *“if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation”* (Rom. 10:9-10).

Salvation comes only through Jesus’ righteousness being credited to you because of your faith in Him (Rom. 4:5). *“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes”* (Rom. 10:4). Even so, Amen.

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