

Righteousness

Consider a question as we begin to examine these words of scripture this morning . . . “When Jesus used the word ‘Righteous’ as He spoke about the souls of the people around Him, what did He mean?” And as He walked among the men and women of His day, could He find any of them to be “Righteous”? And even now, in this day, can it be said that Jesus can find “Righteous” men and women among the souls of this generation?

Listen as Jesus addressed this question as He chose one of His blessed disciples, Matthew, to come and follow Him! Here beginning in verse 27 of Luke chapter 5,

²⁷After these things He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” ²⁸So he left all, rose up, and followed Him.

²⁹Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them. ³⁰And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, “Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

³¹Jesus answered and said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³²I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Luke 5:27-32)

Within these precious words, we see another distinctive attribute of the heart of God being revealed. And we must always be very careful and attentive as we read His words or else, we’ll miss out on the meaning that Jesus intends for us.

Here, just after having healed a man who was paralyzed, Jesus stepped out into the street, and there encountered a tax collector sitting in his booth. And with no apparent previous knowledge about this man and without any prelude of conversation, Jesus exercised the amazing and sovereign Will that only the Almighty God Himself can exercise. And with simple words, called this man Matthew into the eternal Kingdom of God. And not only into His Kingdom, but to also be one of His blessed disciples.

Folks, there is nothing recorded in these Gospels to indicate that there was anything special about this man Matthew that prompted Jesus to choose Him, no “good or righteous thing” in the person of Matthew that caused Jesus to desire to make him one of His disciples.

And neither is it said, as many of our brethren in other denominations believe, that God had looked down through time and saw that Matthew would turn from his sinful ways and choose Christ to be his Savior. None of that is mentioned here or anywhere else in these scriptures.

No, this is simply the way of God's "Amazing Grace". He makes sovereign choices, irrespective of who we are and of the things that we might have done. And praise be to God that He does that!

This is an example of God working out the mysterious truths expressed in Ephesians chapter 1, where we are told that God actually made these choices before the foundations of the earth were laid. And this was simply the irresistible grace of God at work in this special moment as the Holy Spirit applied Jesus' call with sovereign and divine power.

As for the man himself, here called by his Hebrew name, Levi, and also called in other places in these gospels by His Greek name, Matthew, thanks be to God, his response to this sovereign call was not left up to him alone. God is full of grace and mercy, and He also gave Matthew the sovereign gift of knowing how he must respond. As we are told here, "So Matthew left all, rose up, and followed Him."

How do we know all of these things that I am saying about God and about His calling and about Matthew's response to be true? We know that it is all of God and nothing of ourselves because of the scripture truths that we have been studying over the past few weeks. May I remind us of these special truths? Listen! This is verse 44 of John chapter 6. There Jesus said,

⁴⁴No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. (John 6:44)

Note carefully, Jesus' use of the word "can". He is clearly saying that no one, of their own ability and strength, is able to come to Him. That ability and strength comes only from God the Father.

And then also in verse 63 of John 6, Jesus tells us that

⁶³It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. (John 6:63)

And also, in verse 65 of that same chapter, Jesus said,

⁶⁵. . . "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." (John 6:65)

And also, in Romans 9 verse 16 where we are told,

¹⁶It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. (Romans 9:16)

Matthew's response to immediately get up, to leave all that he had worked for all of his life, and to follow this strange young man Jesus, was in every way because of the sovereign working of God's Holy Spirit.

Again, those words in verse 63 of John 6 where Jesus said

⁶³It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. (John 6:63)

Yes, Matthew's "free will" was at work in this whole transaction, but according to these scripture truths, his "Will" was being prompted by God's Spirit and now Matthew wanted to forsake everything that he was doing and to follow Jesus.

And while it is not said here, it is implied that Matthew now realized that He was one of those that Jesus here called "the sick", and "a sinner in need of repentance". Listen! Verse 31!

³¹Jesus answered and said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³²I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Luke 5:31-32)

It seems that, by the unction of the Holy Spirit" Matthew was immediately able to recognize that this was him, a sick and wretched sinner in need of a Savior.

And we aren't told why, but it is obvious from these words that those Scribes and Pharisees were not given that same gift of grace at this time. They did not know that they also were "sick" sinners in need of a Savior. They thought themselves to be "righteous".

Folks, within these words a contrast is being given, a contrast that is present within most every group of people. Some people within a group are humbled by the Holy Spirit and they can hear the still small voice of God and they know that they truly are sinners in need of a Savior. But others, within that same group will believe themselves to be righteous.

From the human side of the equation, why would that be so? Why is there such diverse thinking on the part of people? One of the reasons has to do with our understanding of the meaning of this word, "Righteous". Verse 32, Jesus said . . .

³²I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Luke 5:32)

Jesus' use of this word "Righteous", as He spoke to these Scribes and Pharisees is mysterious in that He knew well from the long-standing truths that He Himself had

spoken into these scriptures, especially from the words of King David in Psalms 14 and Psalm 53, that there really is none "Righteous" who walk this earth, not even one.

But here, Jesus was making an important point to the Scribes and the Pharisees who mistakenly thought that their observance of the law and their doing of "good works" made them "Righteous". But it did not! And it does not for any of us. Just doing good and righteous things does not make a person "Righteous".

Our Catholic brethren are also confused about this matter of "Righteousness". Their doctrines declare that they have an "inherent Righteousness" abiding within their souls, a "Righteousness" that is their own, put there by some ceremonial act done by a priest as they were "christened" in the first days of their life.

But we know those beliefs to be misguided and false. We know from the words of Romans chapter 4, where God speaking about the faith of Abraham, said that Abraham's "faith was credited to Him as "Righteousness". That word "credited" is also translated as "imputed", meaning that the "Righteousness" that Abraham had was put into him as a "free gift", "imputed" into him by God's Holy Spirit. And even then, it was not Abraham's own Inherent "Righteousness", but rather, it was the "Righteousness of Christ" who came to live within his soul.

Let me say that again! Please know with a certainty that Abraham's "Righteousness" would never be His own personal "Righteousness", gained because of some special works or behaviors on his part. And neither will ours! It will ever and always be the "Righteousness of Christ" dwelling within us. And Praise be to God for that!

And further, we don't have to work to maintain our "Righteousness", we could not even if we tried. Our responsibility is to instead maintain our personal relationship with the Person of Christ, and with that, His "Righteousness" remains within us, for now and for always, throughout all eternity. And again, Praise be to God for that!

And all of this was going to be so for this man Matthew as Jesus called him into service within His Kingdom. And it is a wonderful occasion to observe.

I believe that Matthew's call into the ministry was as simple as it seems. An odd choice in that Matthew was a tax collector. Someone not well-liked at all by his

neighbors. He made his living, and sometimes great fortunes, from collecting tax money from his own people and then giving it to the Romans.

Also, the Romans allowed the tax collectors to keep a percentage of the collection as their fee. And sometimes, perhaps too often, the tax collectors would overcharge the people and then keep the extra for themselves. That was suggested in the confession of another tax collector, Zacchaeus, when he said that if he had defrauded anyone, he would pay back four-fold. And it was because of such behaviors that tax collectors were a stench in the nostrils of their fellow Israelites.

And again, observing this whole transaction take place, were some men from the other end of the religious spectrum from that of the tax collectors, the Scribes and the Pharisees, men who devoted their lives to being and doing those things which they had determined were "righteous" deeds. And again, their theology and their doctrinal beliefs gave them the very sincere, but very misguided understanding that if they followed the demands of the law and showed acts of kindness towards other people, then their behavior would be accounted to them as "righteousness".

And folks, that kind of "system of belief" did seem, at least on the surface, to be what the Book of the Law suggested. And because of that, the Scribes and the Pharisees were very sincere and very diligent in their following of those kinds of rituals. They tithed on every penny. And they gave alms to the poor. And they fasted at all the proper times.

And by doing those things, the Scribes and the Pharisees "looked righteous" and they fully believed that they were "righteous".

But, as we now know, there was a serious flaw in their religious beliefs. The doing of good things, whether for God or for people, does not and cannot in itself, make a person righteous.

And yes, such things as those are truly good and right things to do, and God does require them of us. He tells us so in the words of Matthew chapter 25, where He tells us that "that which we do for the least of our brethren, it is accounted to us as our having done it for Him".

But dear friends, unless another step in the process is taken first, all of the things that come afterwards are of no value and are not "accounted unto a person as righteousness".

That step in becoming righteous is an intimate personal relationship with the person of Christ, brought about by His shed blood on the cross. How do we know that that is so? God Himself has made that special truth clear to us, from the first moments that He gave the Book of the Law, and then continuing on until this very day.

And Jesus, quoting those words from the Book of the Law made it clear for us. When asked “what is the greatest of all commandments”, without hesitation, Jesus said,

29 . . . “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. ‘This is the first commandment. 31And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 2:29-31)

Why do I find need to quote these particular verses within this study about Jesus choosing Matthew to be one of His disciples and also the response of the Scribes and Pharisees to His choice of this “sinner and tax collector”

It's because this command to “Love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul and mind” is essential to the righteousness that the Scribes and Pharisees so clearly and wrongly misunderstood.

But why would that be so? What stood in their way of understanding the command to love the Lord their God? The problem is that “Spiritual understanding” can only be discerned by the Holy Spirit who lives within a person”. This is ever and always true.

And while the Scribes and the Pharisees were well schooled in the academic meaning of these scriptures, they did not have the Holy Spirit living within them to interpret the words to their minds, making those learned men helpless to understand.

And God is unyielding in those requirements. We must “love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our strength.” And then and only then will He be gracious and give to us the righteousness that He requires.

But as we look at the words of this passage before us today, at this particular moment in these scriptures, neither Matthew nor the Scribes and Pharisees had the Holy Spirit dwelling within them to give them “Spiritual Discernment”.

So then, what made the difference, and what was the reason that prompted Jesus to choose Matthew over someone else, perhaps even one of those Scribes or Pharisees?

The simplest answer is, God does not tell us why. And it will remain a mystery. Just like it will remain a mystery as to why God chose you and chose me, wretched sinners to be His blessed children. But He did and we are so very glad He did!

Folks, God is “sovereign”, and He makes sovereign choices, choices that we don’t understand, and every choice He makes is a good one.

And as I said a few moments ago, I am personally comfortable in believing that Matthew’s name was “written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” and that he was chosen for this special calling long before the foundations of the earth were laid. And this was simply the irresistible grace of God at work in this special moment as the Holy Spirit applied Jesus’ call with sovereign and divine power.

As for Matthew, it would seem that in those moments, as Jesus spoke to him, something inside of Matthew was changed by the Holy Spirit. I am convinced that in those brief moments, Matthew came to understand that He was a “terminally sick sinner” in need of this “Great Physician” to save him. That sure seems to be the contrast that Jesus was drawing as He said these words,

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³²I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”
(Luke 5:31-32)

In his new humbled condition, Matthew was able to hear the “still small voice” of God calling to him, but the Scribes and the Pharisees could not. It is only the ears of the repentant sinner that can hear God’s “still small voice”. The more righteous that a person believes himself or herself to be, the less likely he or she will be able to hear the voice of God.

What then should the message be for you and for me, here and now, in our day and in our personal experience with God? The message is that you and I must guard ourselves carefully against the same kinds of errors in thinking that the Scribes and the Pharisees suffered from. We must not allow ourselves to believe that just because we have sat in these pews for so many years, and just because we always try to be “good people”, that we are somehow personally “righteous”.

We must continually remind ourselves that true righteousness comes only through a relationship with Christ, brought about by His shed blood on the cross, and no other way.

Let me read some words that I have gleaned from one of my Bible Dictionaries regarding "righteousness", and we'll close with these words. Listen!

Righteousness is that which God requires of humanity and which God gives as a gift to a person through faith. In this line of thought, faith is the condition for the reception of the gift of righteousness from God. God acts in Christ, and, in turn, humans react by having faith. Then God reckons them, on the basis of their faith, as if they were righteous.

This is true righteousness, the kind that is in Christ and that we receive only through a deep faith and love for the person of the Lord Jesus. All other righteousness is counterfeit.

Let's Pray!