

Matthew Chapter 5:20 – Righteousness that Surpasses the Scribes and Pharisees

Translation:

For I say to you all that if your righteousness would not surpass more than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will absolutely not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Analysis:

The literal translation adds a small amount of emphasis.

This sentence is a third-class conditional statement, meaning that the first part must be met for the sentence to be satisfied. The sentence is “you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” The if clause is “if your righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.”

Having the strong negations in both the condition and the sentence creates an emphatic way of saying, if your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees then you will enter the kingdom of heaven.

The difference is that the positive statement does not exclude those without righteousness. The absolute requirement is righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Two words indicate that “your righteousness” must be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees.

1. The verb “περισσεύω perisseuō” is a verb that means to exceed in quantity or quality; to have in abundance
2. The comparative adjective “πολύς polys” indicates an abundance, more than, or greater than.

The sentence (not the condition) contains an “ou mē.” This is the strongest negation in Greek, absolutely not, by no means possible.

This indicates that Jesus is telling the disciples that have believed in Him that they must have a righteousness that far exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, otherwise they will absolutely not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Righteousness is the word “δικαιοσύνη dikaiosynē.” This word is part of the word group “δίκη dikē” (pic).

This is defined as “the quality of being upright; the quality, state, or practice of judicial responsibility with a focus on fairness; quality or state of judicial correctness; the quality or characteristic of upright behavior.”

The question comes in when we begin to look at this statement outside of its context and place a theological presumption on this statement. We must remember the context to understand what Jesus was saying.

Hebrew Mindset:

Righteousness is used in Matthew as behavioral rightness in alignment with the behavioral standards that God gave to Israel in the Law of Moses. This is not exclusive, but calling a person right meant in accordance with the Law.

Matthew 1:19, 3:15, 6:1

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It is true that before God and when evaluated by God that no one is righteous (Psalm 14:1-3) and the only way to be right before God is as a gift (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1-8). This is understood as imputed righteousness.

But there is a type of behavioral righteousness that God demanded of Israel in accordance with the Law and Covenant of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:24-25; 1 Samuel 26:23; 2 Samuel 22:21-25; Isaiah 33:13-15).

The difficulty is that this is righteousness so that one would enter into the kingdom of heaven.

This is often misunderstood as a behavioral rightness that God would approve that is in accordance with the righteousness of God.

Possible Interpretations:

1. Verse 20 is seen as impossible, and Jesus is pressing the people to seek the righteousness of God by grace through faith.
2. Jesus is telling them that they needed to be better than the Pharisees and scribes to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The first possibility is theologically accurate regarding being righteous before God and gaining eternal life. Let's see what one commentator states:

“True righteousness involved a whole other set of priorities and ethics (Matthew 6-7) than what the scribes and Pharisees were teaching. Jesus concludes His message by illustrating that fake righteousness (the kind being offered by the scribes and Pharisees and true righteousness (which meant humility of spirit and looking to God in faith) represent two houses, one built on a foundation of sand (fake righteousness) and one built on the rock (true righteousness). The one would last forever, while the other would collapse in the storm (Matthew 7:24-29).

Unless one had true righteousness, they would never enter the kingdom of God. When Nicodemus sought Jesus' direction, Jesus told him directly that to enter the kingdom of God he had to be born again (John 3:3) – true righteousness comes by being reborn through faith in Him, not by works of law. The Law of Moses, which Jesus fulfilled on the cross, served to point us to our need for a Redeemer who could provide a permanent and final resolution to our guilt and shame.”

The problem with this interpretation is not theological. But I do not believe that this represents a thought that “entering the kingdom of heaven” is akin to having eternal life. The righteousness referred to would need to be understood as imputed righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The next problem is that if Jesus was telling them that they needed imputed righteousness, then wouldn't He have told them how to have imputed righteousness? But in Matthew, this is never addressed; instead, Jesus teaches how to have a proper behavioral righteousness.

Based upon this evaluation, Matthew 5:20 is not about imputed righteousness but behavioral righteousness (Ezekiel 18:5-9). Jesus is telling them that their behavioral righteousness must exceed and be greater than the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

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What is the righteousness of the Pharisees? According to 5:20, there is a righteousness that the Pharisees had. So, what is the problem?

In Matthew, Jesus challenges the Pharisees' righteousness for what it really is. This is the essence of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 6:2-4 – The Pharisees give to the poor (righteous act) but so that they would be praised and honored by men.

Matthew 6:5 – The Pharisees pray (righteous act) but they do so that they would be praised and honored by men.

Matthew 6:16 – The Pharisees fasted (righteous act) but they did so with a gloomy face so that they would be recognized, praised, and honored by men.

Matthew 6:19-24 – The Pharisees treasured wealth and power rather than God and His kingdom.

To have their righteous actions surpass the righteous acts of the scribes and Pharisees, they must both understand the point of the Law and do the Law (Matthew 23:1-28).

Other passages indicate the requirement to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 7:21-23 – Many of those who claim Jesus as Lord will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 18:1-6 – One must be humble to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 19:23-26 – The provision of God is necessary for someone to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

John 3:1-5 – One must be born from above to enter into the kingdom (of God).

Conclusion:

The scribes and Pharisees were not going to enter the kingdom of heaven because there was a problem with their belief and their actions. They appear to follow the Law, but there are at least 4 problems identified in Matthew.

Problem 1 – They rejected God and the Messiah

Problem 2 – They did not understand the intent of the Law

Problem 3 – They used the Law as means for power and glory from men

Problem 4 – Outside of the view of men. they violated the Law

Timeless Truth:

Believers are also instructed to have behavioral righteousness, but entering the kingdom of heaven is not on the table. We are not under Law but grace.