

(Matt. 5:20) - As we ended our study with this verse in the last lesson, we will begin this study with this verse also. The truth and reality of "**RIGHTEOUSNESS**" is one of the most important doctrines of Holy Scripture and the Gospel itself. Without an understanding of this doctrine, one cannot understand the Bible, the Gospel, or salvation itself. God has declared that in the end He will judge the whole world by the standard of righteousness as it is found and declared in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31). The word "*righteousness*" is virtually the same as "justification," and it is as to do with a person's standing before God. To be righteous in God's sight, we must be forgiven of our sins on a just ground, and we must be declared justified on a just ground. The only just ground for a right standing before God is the merit of Christ's obedience unto death as the Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer of His people. This is Christ's righteousness imputed to God's elect (Rom. 4:1-8; 8:33-34; 2 Cor. 5:19-21). Recall that the Lord Himself described the totality of His whole work as the Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer of His people to be the fulfilling of "*all righteousness*" (Matt. 3:15). The Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to describe the Gospel as the revelation of "*the righteousness of God*" (Rom. 1:16-17).

Here, after having stated that He Himself had come to fulfill the law, the Lord states "*that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*" The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees can be seen in passages of Scripture such as Luke 18:9-14, Romans 9:31-10:3, and Philippians 3:4-6. Like all people by nature, they believed and taught that sinners could make themselves righteous before God by their works - their efforts to obey the law of God. Like all people by nature, they measured righteousness on the sliding scale of man's morality, sincerity, generosity, etc. But God's Word declares that righteousness is that perfect satisfaction to God's law and justice that can only be found in Christ (Rom. 10:4). To show this reality, the Lord begins here to show the extent and requirement of God's holy law and justice that no sinner can meet, not even by his best efforts to keep the law (Rom. 3:9-20; Gal. 3:10-11).

(Matt. 5:21-22) - The sixth commandment prohibited murder (Exod. 20:13). The punishment for the deliberate taking of another's life was death (Exod. 21:12; Lev. 24:17), a penalty established long before the law was given on Sinai (Gen. 9:6). Murderers were in danger of condemnation unless God was pleased to show them mercy for Christ's sake, as with King David who was a murderer (2 Sam. 12:7-13). While most of us have never committed the act of murder, the Lord gives a full understanding of this law which makes us ALL GUILTY of this sin. "*Brother*" here means simply a fellow human being and has no religious significance. Here the Lord shows how God's law not only forbids sinful acts but also sinful thoughts and motives. The law reaches the hearts of people. This is what Paul learned when the Holy Spirit convinced him of sin (Rom. 7:7-14). To be angry with another person "*without a cause*," i.e. a just cause, is murder. Anger is not always sinful. The Bible tells us that "*God is angry with the wicked every day*" (Psa. 7:11), and this is a just and holy anger against sinners to whom God imputes sin (cf. Psa. 5:5). It is possible to be angry for a worthy cause and not sin (Eph. 4:26; cf. Psa. 139:21-22). This is anger that arises out of a zeal for God and is kindled against sin (Mark 3:5). But when we are angry with another person out of sinful, selfish, or self-righteous motive, it is the same as murder (Luke 18:9).

It is wrong to call a person "*Raca*," which means "worthless" and "good for nothing." This is to murder a person's reputation seeking to ruin his good name. Those who were guilty of this sin were brought before the highest Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, and judged for this crime. It is even worse to say to a man "*Thou fool*," meaning that he was vile and wicked, an

ungodly wretch and a graceless soul, even predestined to hell. As believers, we accept and reject the fellowship of people based on their confessions of what they call truth (2 John 9-11). But we cannot see into another person's heart to know their inward thoughts and spiritual condition so as to say that there is no hope of them ever being saved by God's grace. To make such a judgment is to commit murder in thought. Were it not for the blood of Christ, we would all perish forever as we are all guilty of multiple sins against the Lord (Rom. 6:23).

(Matt. 5:23-26) - The Lord states that it is far more important to be reconciled to a brother than to perform religious duties. We must always be ready to settle quarrels and disagreements, lest they grow into greater evils as they can sometimes foster the kind of anger and resentment that can be considered murder. When an Israelite went to worship God at the "*altar*" and then remembered a dispute between himself and a brother, he was first to go and make things right with him. As true believers, we do not come to an earthly altar but to the Altar Who sits at the right hand of God (Heb. 13:10). Christ is our Altar! We draw near to God in and by our Lord Jesus Christ and His perfect offering for sin (Heb. 10:19-20; 1 Tim. 2:5). Before seeking to worship God, make certain there is no ill will between us and anyone else. Holding onto grudges and maintaining an angry spirit toward someone is detrimental to our worship of God. Be forgiving, remembering that God has, for Christ's sake, forgiven us (Eph. 4:32).

The same principle applies in disputes that may even take us before a civil judge. In all disagreements, be eager to seek after peace and harmony in the spirit of grace, forgiveness, and forbearance, just as the Lord God has settled our dispute with Him by His grace through His Son. We may go the full length of our dispute, end up in a court of law, and be found guilty. We would then have to pay the full extent of the sentence of the law when it could have been avoided by settling matters before this. Let us consider how Christ paid our debt to God's law and justice by paying "*the uttermost farthing*" to God's justice for our sins. He did this for people who by nature had an unjust dispute with Him. He did nothing wrong, and we have done everything wrong. So, consider this in light of God's free mercy and grace towards us in that "*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Rom. 5:8), and "*when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son*" (Rom. 5:10).

(Matt. 5:27-28) - The seventh commandment is violated not only by the outward act of adultery but also by the impure thoughts, imaginations, and fantasies of lust of the mind so that even the unclean desire of passion toward another is a violation of "*Thou shalt not commit adultery*" (Exod. 20:14; cf. Prov. 6:32). This is the adultery of the heart, and it is as sinful in God's eyes as adultery in the act. There is also the sin of spiritual adultery which is idolatry. Before conversion, we are all spiritual adulterers worshiping and serving an idol. This holds true until the Holy Spirit brings us to know the true and living God through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why true believers are commanded by God not to love the world and the things of the world (1 John 2:15-16). We have been espoused to one Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are, by God's grace, to remain loyal and faithful to Him (2 Cor. 11:2-4).

When we consider the reality both of God's law against murder and against adultery and how they reach unto our very hearts, our thoughts, little wonder that David, having a heart-understanding of the demands of the law concerning deeds and thoughts declared, "*If Thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O LORD, who shall stand*" (Psa. 130:3)? We are all guilty of the sin of adultery. This ought to give us the greatest motive and desire to fight these sins, both in deed and in thought, while realizing that we always fall short of the perfection of righteousness that can only be found in Christ. Therefore, we live in continual gratitude to God for His grace in that "*we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous*" (1 John 2:1), and that His blood "*cleanseth us from all sin*" (1 John 1:7).