

If you can imagine living in a society that was governed by religious rules and religious leaders then maybe you can appreciate what life was like in Israel in the time of Christ. Despite the Roman occupation of their land there was no doubt in the minds of anyone that the ones who had the biggest influence over their lives were the Jewish religious leaders, and especially the Pharisees and the Scribes. They were the ones responsible for interpreting and enforcing the laws of God upon His people and had the power to punish those who stepped out of line.

The everyday Jew accepted this as the way it had been for centuries and the way it would always be. They went to great lengths to avoid upsetting the religious hierarchy and would definitely not have ever considered challenging them, for these were men with Almighty God firmly on their side. They respected them for their outwardly righteous lifestyle and believed that their standard of goodness—which was way beyond any standard that they themselves could ever attain to—gave to their nation favour in the sight of their holy God.

With such an upbringing we can appreciate the confusion that the coming of Jesus into their midst generated. The crowds liked Him and were amazed at the miracles He performed. His teaching was not dry and judgmental like the Pharisees but fresh and invigorating. And yet it was obvious that the religious leaders vehemently disliked Him and those who got close to Him, and continually accused Him of breaking all manner of laws and undermining the teachings of Moses.

So when Jesus sat there on the Mountain and began to teach things that were so different to what the Pharisees taught, His disciples and the crowd would have been quick to assume that the message He brought was a completely new one. That it couldn't be based as the Pharisees was, on the precepts of the Law and the Prophets because it was obviously so different to what they proclaimed.

It did seem that Jesus really was suggesting that what Moses had given them was no longer relevant, for He definitely seemed to think very little about healing on a Sabbath, and rumour had it that he had even encouraged one guy He healed to pick up his bedroll and carry it on the Sabbath day.

So was He as dangerous to their traditional belief system as the Pharisees said He was? Indeed, was His power from the devil rather from God as He claimed?

Such questions would never have been far from their minds even as they gathered to hear this One who some claimed to be the Messiah. And such inner questioning makes sense of the words that Jesus proclaimed in verses 17-18

**"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.**

Jesus shows here the knowledge He had of those who gathered to hear Him. He knew the questioning in their hearts and the fear they had that He was breaking down the traditions that God had established over the generations through His prophets. Don't think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets He says. And His listeners would have understood that the law and the prophets referred to all the teaching that we accept today as the Old Testament.

It was a lot more than just the ten commandments or the ceremonial law. It was the complete record of God's dealings with this world and particularly His people from creation to the generation of Christ's coming. It included the story of Abraham, the giving of God's law in the wilderness, the conquering and then losing of the promise land, and then their return to it after the exile.

It revealed all that was needed to satisfy God's perfect righteousness, and in so doing presented the impossibility of doing so. But then it also recorded details of the animal sacrifices that pointed towards the perfect sacrifice that one day would enable reconciliation between a perfect God and imperfect man.

Within this record there also existed all the promises that God had made for their future including the coming of One who, as the Suffering Servant, would redeem them, Restore them, and bring in the glorious new kingdom of God.

Consequently Jesus as God the Son can say with great authority: " all that Has gone before finds its fulfillment in me. I have not come to abolish the past but to complete it," for that is what the word fulfill in this context means.

Christ in His coming completes the plan that was in the heart of God from before the creation of the world, and He especially did so by living as a man without sin. He alone fulfilled the whole law of God in every part.

Therefore God was enabled to present before Himself a new creation cleansed through the blood of the lamb. A people set apart until Himself and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a new life that honours and glorifies Him.

But just because Jesus has now completed or fulfilled the law in our place, it doesn't follow that we have no obligation to the moral law or commandments of God. V19 is very strong:

***Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.***

Even as Christ in fulfilling the law has now covered all our sins by His blood, He has also called us to seek after a closer walk to God in all His purity by the power of the Spirit. Not for us is the approach of the Pharisees who sought to gain credit before God by keeping a set of rules. Christ calls us to first practice for ourselves and then to encourage others to do what the Spirit shows us is pleasing to God, and to be aware of the need when we sin, to humbly seek from God through confession the forgiveness and the righteousness He delights to give.

That's the righteousness Jesus then goes on to speak about in v20.

***For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.***

This would have sounded so impossible to His listeners. The Pharisees were renown for their keeping of the letter of the law and they made sure that all around them knew it. In the parable that Jesus told about the Pharisee praying he referred to him as one who exalted himself before God, and that's exactly what they did. They saw their righteousness as self earned and as something they could, and did, parade before men. As far as they were concerned it set them above other men. Set them above Jesus.

Now here we find these humble followers of Jesus, being told that they had to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees in order to enter the kingdom. An impossibility.

They knew that, because the closer they came to Jesus the more conscious they became of their own unrighteousness. And the same is true for us. The longer I am a Christian and the more I learn about God and about myself, the more conscious I become of the great gap between what I am and what I want to be for Him.

But Jesus never asked from His followers something that He could not do through them, if they would only surrender themselves to Him. And Jesus knew that he was able to bestow upon them a righteousness that would exceed all other as a gift of God's grace. His own righteousness replacing their sinfulness.

The prophet Isaiah had already predicted this some centuries before when He had proclaimed the invitation of God in Isaiah 1:18

**"Come now, let us reason together,"  
says the LORD.**

**"Though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson,  
they shall be like wool.**

Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us just how it has become possible:

**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God**

This is the righteousness that we can receive from Jesus as His gift of love. It's the only righteousness that secures us a place in His Kingdom. And it endures forever.

*I'm told that the Chinese character for righteousness is composed of two separate characters. One standing for a lamb the other for I in the sense of me. When lamb is placed directly above I, a new word, righteousness is formed. This is a picture of God's Grace. Between the sinner and God the holy one, there is interposed by faith the Lamb of God. By virtue of His sacrifice He has received me on the ground of faith, and I have become righteous in His sight.*

It is now that righteousness that every believer must seek after in the things we do, think about, and say. That is Christ commandment to us. So in those times when we sense that we are living less than righteous lives. When we are about to react badly, or treat someone in a non-Christ like way. Let us recall the Lamb that was slain between us and God. The cost that was paid to make us holy, and be motivated anew to live now, worthy of the Saviour who endure all for us.