

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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REPENT

Matthew 4:17

I would like to invite you to open your Bible and to turn with me to Matthew 4:17. And this is what we read.

Matthew 4:17. From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Preaching repentance

Let's put this verse in its context. In v. 12 of this same chapter, we read that John the Baptist was arrested by king Herod. And that would be more or less the end of John's ministry. As you know, not long after that, he was put to death by Herod. It was after John's arrest that we see Jesus beginning His ministry. When the flag fell from John's hand, Jesus picked it up. As it says here in Matthew 4:17, *from that time*, i.e. after John's arrest, *Jesus began to preach*.

And what did Jesus preach? *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* This is interesting because Jesus preached exactly the same message as John the Baptist. If you look at Matthew 3:2, it says that John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!* This is exactly what Jesus preached, word for word. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* Isn't that remarkable? John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus were preaching the same message of salvation, except of course that Jesus took the message much deeper spiritually than what John the Baptist was able to understand at that time.

Turning to righteousness

So the Lord Jesus preached repentance. *Repent.* That's the first word that He says as He begins His ministry. Repent from what? What is 'repentance' from Jesus' perspective? Basically, repentance is about turning away from sin and turning to righteousness. Repentance in the Bible has to do with turning away from the old life of sin and turning to a new life of righteousness. And today, in this lesson, I would like to talk to you about this topic of righteousness. And we are going to look at it from the point of view of salvation. Let me tell you right from the beginning that if there is no righteousness in the life of the Christian, there is no Christianity to talk about. It is just as simple and plain as that.

Now remember what happened when Jesus and John the Baptist first met. Jesus asked John to be baptized by him. But John didn't like the idea. And Jesus insisted. He said in Matthew 3:15, *Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.* 'Accept Me for baptism', Jesus

said. Why? Because *it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*. Jesus was concerned to fulfill all righteousness. Not some part of righteousness, not most of righteousness, but to fulfill all righteousness.

So concerned was Jesus for righteousness that He is called *the Righteous* (1John 2:1). He fulfilled all righteousness by submitting Himself to John's baptism, the superior submitting to the ministry of the inferior. And He preached righteousness as He called people to repentance, to turn away from sin and to turn to righteousness.

Defining righteousness

So, what is righteousness? What does it mean to fulfill all righteousness? Basically, it is to fulfill all that God has commanded or required of us. Righteousness in the Bible can be described in a nutshell in this way. It has to do with a right relationship with God and with our fellow men. It is a very practical word in the Bible. It has to do with life. It has to do with relationships. Righteousness, I repeat, has to do with our right relationship with God and with our fellow men.

You remember that the Lord Jesus said that all the commandments can be summed up in one sentence, namely that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself. That sums up the whole essence of righteousness. Righteousness is a matter of right relationship, and this right relationship is defined in the Bible in terms of love. It is to love God with everything you've got, with your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength. And it is to love your neighbour on the same basis as yourself, treating your neighbour in the same way that you treat yourself.

The Lord Jesus asked John the Baptist to be baptized by him for the sake of fulfilling all righteousness. Why? Because this was commanded by God. It was an ordinance of God. And every ordinance of God is designed to have a definite effect upon our relationship to Him and our relationship with our neighbour. Every commandment in the Bible has either to do with our relationship with God or our relationship with our neighbour. Just look at the Ten Commandments. Every commandment is simply like this: it is the matter of relationship with God and with the neighbour. You cannot disobey any word of God without affecting your relationship with God and with the neighbour.

And Jesus' primary concern as He begins His ministry is that we have a right relationship with God and a right relationship with our fellow men. That requires a complete change in our lives. And the starting point of that change is repentance. The Lord Jesus preached repentance because it is the turning point from a life of sin to a righteous life. Repentance is what brings you from an old life of sin to a new life of righteousness.

Righteousness in the kingdom of heaven

So Jesus says, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. What is the kingdom of heaven? I would like to give you Paul's definition of the kingdom of heaven. In Romans 14:17, we read, *for the kingdom of God is not food and drink but... righteousness...* There we are again. ... *the kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Now observe this. Righteousness, peace, joy. These three things are inseparable. Without peace, you don't have joy. Without righteousness, you don't have peace. And so without righteousness, you don't have either peace nor joy. It is not possible to get peace and joy without passing through righteousness. Unless righteousness becomes a reality in your life, peace and joy are not going to be your portion.

So what is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is righteousness, first and foremost. Then peace and joy, in the Holy Spirit. And this is very important to understand. The Holy Spirit is the key to understand the kingdom of God. It is the One who makes this righteousness, this peace, and this joy a reality in your life. In other words, the kingdom of God becomes a reality in your life when the Holy Spirit comes into your life, and there establishes righteousness, and consequently peace and joy.

Surpassing the righteousness of the Pharisees

Now, in Matthew 5:20, the Lord Jesus makes this striking statement: *...unless your righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.* This is a very strong statement. To be more righteous than the Pharisees? How can it be? These are the most religious people that this world has ever seen. More scrupulous to religious details, more careful about conduct and performance in its outward expression, you just can't be. You just can't compete with these people for religious behaviour. Yet, the Lord Jesus says, *...unless your righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will under no condition enter the kingdom of heaven.*

When we struggle with that verse, very often the first question that comes to our mind is, 'Who, then, can be saved?' Let me suggest that this shouldn't be the first question. Rather, we should first ask, 'What is wrong with the righteousness of the Pharisees?' And in this regard, let me tell you this. Doctrinal orthodoxy does not save anyone. You can believe all the right things, all the right doctrines, and yet, at the end, never enter the kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul, after he became a Christian, never denied that he was still a Pharisee. You remember that in the book of Acts, Paul said, *I am a Pharisee* (Acts 23:6). Not I was. As a Christian, Paul still called himself a Pharisee. And you can make such a claim only if the doctrines of the Pharisees are the same as the ones that a Christian holds. The Pharisees, as far as the law of Moses was concerned, taught virtually the same thing as the Christians do.

And Jesus said the same thing. In Matthew 23:3, He said, 'Whatever the Pharisees tell you to observe, do it.' In other words, the Lord Jesus was saying, 'Do what they teach you to do.' And this implies that Jesus agrees with the teaching of the Pharisees. At least with most of it. Because as you know, Jesus also denounced some of their teachings. But for the most part, there is an agreement.

You have to be born of the Spirit

But were the Pharisees saved? No. *Unless your righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees*, you are not going to be saved. That is why I am saying that orthodoxy alone in the doctrines that you believe does not guarantee anyone's salvation. That is what James warns us about in James 2. He says, 'Don't think that you are saved because you believe that there is one God. The devil believes that too. Don't think that you are saved because you believe that Jesus is the Son of God. The devil believes that too. If that is what you call faith, then that kind of faith is still all in the head and that faith does not save anyone.' It is when your faith is translated into righteousness of life that we can talk about a saving faith.

How then can we be saved? If the Pharisees could work so hard in religious scruples and carefulness and not be saved, how are we going to be saved? Precisely, not by our own efforts. I would like to answer this question on the basis of another verse. We call that a parallel verse. The Lord Jesus says in Matthew 5:20, *...unless your righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees...*, and notice the second part, 'you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.' There is another verse in the teaching of Jesus, a verse addressed to a Pharisee, which also ends in the same way, with the statement, 'you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.' I wonder if you know

where it is. John 3:5. There Jesus says, I say to you, Nicodemus, you, a Pharisee, ...*unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*

The birth of a righteous man

Do you see the similarity between these two verses? Now let's put them together and see what happens. The second part is exactly the same. ...*he cannot enter the kingdom of God.* The first part is not the same, but they are parallel to each other. That means to say that the statement 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of a Pharisee' is parallel to 'unless you be born of water and the Spirit'.

Now we begin to understand Jesus' teaching. The only way our righteousness can exceed that of the Pharisees is by our being born of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who transforms us. That is the essence of Christianity. Christianity is not just a matter of believing the right doctrines. It is believing in such a way that the Spirit of God comes into your life and changes you into a new person.

And what is this new person like? That person is one who is righteous. That's what Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:23-24.

*Ephesians 4:23. And be renewed in the spirit of your mind,
24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness.*

There is the new man! He is created in the likeness of God, in true righteousness and in true holiness. This is what Christianity is all about. It is when you allow the Spirit of God to come into your life and to make you a new person, a righteous person.

Becoming the righteousness of God

Now, I want to show you another verse in connection to righteousness, an important verse that we often quote to young Christians to tell them not to marry non-Christians.

2Corinthians 6:14. Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have (have what?) righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

Here the apostle Paul speaks of the non-Christians in terms of lawlessness and darkness. But of the Christians, he refers to them in terms of righteousness and light. The Christian is righteousness and light.

I think there is no problem for anyone to understand that the Christian is to be light. The Lord Jesus makes that well-known statement in the Sermon on the Mount when He says, *You* (as Christians) *are the light of the world* (Matthew 5:14). To light, Paul adds the element of righteousness. You, as Christians, are light and righteousness. You are light in the world and you are righteousness in the world. In the same way that you are the light of the world, you are to be righteousness in the world.

Wow! When you think about it, that's quite a statement to make. We, Protestants, are more used to speak of righteousness as being 'imputed' to us. The doctrine of the imputation of righteousness is a very important one for our understanding of salvation. But don't think that that's the only thing that the Bible teaches about righteousness in relation to salvation. No, no. Here Paul is not talking about righteousness as being imputed to us. He is talking about the Christian as righteousness, a very real and actual righteousness. It is an imperfect righteousness, but righteousness nevertheless. And he says the same thing in 2Corinthians 5:21

2Corinthians 5:21. For God made Jesus who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Jesus.

God sent Jesus into the world to be a sin offering so that we might become the righteousness of God. Notice again. Here it is not only a matter of having a right standing before God. It is also a matter of the Christian becoming the righteousness of God. That means to say that we, ourselves, become a living expression of God's righteousness. We become the very expression of God's righteousness in the world.

The true Christian is righteousness because the Holy Spirit has come into his life and transformed him into a new person, a new creation. Wherever he goes, he is the very expression of God's righteousness.

Notice this. It is not my righteousness. It is God's righteousness. I don't make myself a new creation. This is granted to us by God's grace, by God's power. We are not light because by nature we are light. We are light only because we reflect God's light in our lives, God being the light. In the same, we are righteousness not because by nature we are righteous. When Paul says that we are righteousness, he means that we are reflecting the righteousness of God in the world. Salvation is the expression of God's saving power in our lives as we become God's righteousness.

Choosing to be like Jesus, the Righteous

And if truly, righteousness is a reality in your life, you will never marry a non-Christian, even if it means that you are going to remain single for the rest of your life. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? There is none. Don't be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. If you are the manifestation of God's righteousness, you will have no association, either in marriage or any other kind of close partnership, with a non-believer. You are not going to be mated to lawlessness.

Righteousness, then, is to be like Jesus, called the Righteous in the Bible. And as a new creation, we become more and more like Him in righteousness. Not because we are good in ourselves, but because in God's process of salvation, He is transforming each one of us in this way.

Christ died so that we might become the righteousness of God. And we want to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in this continual process of spiritual transformation. We thank God for so great salvation.