



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Sixth Sunday After Trinity, July 12th, 2015

✠ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠

By human standards, scribes and Pharisees get a really bum rap in the Gospels. Whenever Jesus encounters them he either makes fun of them or he dresses them down, calling them rude names. Yet by human standards, they were quite admirable people.

They lived very active religious lives. Most of them went to church morning and evening. They studied the bible daily. They fasted at least twice a week. They tithed scrupulously everything they owned, down to the tiniest grain of salt. And, as a matter of principal, they gave amazingly generously to beggars, which is probably why we encounter so many of them in the New Testament.

And despite the fact that they knew they were "Chosen People" they didn't keep their faith to themselves. They were far more conscientious about their duty to spread the Gospel than most Christians today. They eagerly shared it with gentiles, and warmly welcomed them into their congregations as inquirers and converts.

Jesus was not exaggerating when he claimed they would travel to the ends of the earth to make a convert. It was thanks to the efforts of the scribes and Pharisees St. Paul and the early evangelists had a network of synagogues at their disposal that encompassed most of the cities and towns in the Roman Empire and beyond.

In fact, the rapid spread of the Christian Gospel in the 1st and 2nd Centuries A.D. can be attributed to the thorough groundwork laid by

the Pharisee missionaries. Thanks to their efforts, most people in the Roman world were at least aware of the unique monotheistic nature of the Jewish faith and its almighty God.

Moreover, the synagogues provided ready pulpits from which to preach the Jesus' Gospel of salvation and congregations sufficiently well versed in the scripture to grasp its implications. The fact of the matter is that far from looking down on the scribes and Pharisee, we should give thanks that these good, kind, pious people paved the way for us.

It must, thus, have been a tremendous shock for the folks listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to learn that if they wanted to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, they needed to be even more righteous than the most pious and charitable people ever. It was like telling Christians that to get into heaven they would have to be more pious than the Pope and more charitable than St. Francis of Assisi. It is an impossibly high standard.

Jesus, however, isn't talking about human standards of holiness. In the Sermon on the Mount he explains it is impossible for human beings to equal God's standards of holiness. It is impossible for us to love our fellow men as freely and fully as God loves us. God's standards are so immeasurably high, he says, they are quite beyond our comprehension.

By God's standard, for example, we don't even need to do people harm to incur God's wrath.

The simple act of getting angry with someone else is enough to send us to hell. By God's standard of righteousness, we should not harbor even the slightest feelings of resentment.

This is an impossibly high standard. Even the most high-minded find minor resentments very hard to control. They pop into our minds when least expected. Even if we immediately try to suppress such thoughts, they remain lurking, ready to surface again. St. Paul aptly describes the human lot when he complains he is quite unable to do things he desperately wants to do and constantly doing things he utterly despises.

An example of almost super human forgiveness is found in an Old Testament lesson for Morning Prayer. It is the story of the odious coward Shimei, a cousin of King Saul, who cursed and taunted King David as he fled Jerusalem during the rebellion led by his son Absalom.

David's spirits were at their lowest ebb over his son's betrayal. And this nasty piece of work gloated over it, throwing stones and hurling vile insults. The tables were quickly turned, however. The rebel forces were swiftly defeated, Absalom was killed, and soon David was on his way back to take up his throne in Jerusalem.

As David crossed the Jordan, he was met by Shimei and all of his children, relatives and retainers cravenly cheering his return. Shimei, prostrating himself, gabled: "Let not my lord impute iniquity unto me, neither remember thou that which thy servant did perversely the day that my lord the king went out of Jerusalem, that the king should not take it to his heart. For thy servant doth know that I have sinned ..."

Abishai, one of David's commanders, advised him to lop the disgusting fellow's head off for cursing the Lord's anointed – a capital offense. But David replied: "Nobody is going to be put to death today. For today I know that I am again king of Israel." Turning to Shimei, David forgave him. "Thou shalt not die," he said.

This was a remarkable display of restraint in an era when rulers exercised the power of life and death over their subjects and it must astounded

David's followers. It must have been hard to believe David didn't harbor some degree of resentment at Shimei's behavior.

The New Testament lesson for Morning Prayer is also taken from St. Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus returns to this issue of forgiveness – pointing out that even the exceedingly high standards laid down in the Law of Moses do not anywhere near reach God's own standards of holiness.

In this passage, he tells us that if we want to be like him, we must not resist those who want to do us harm. If some one hits us in the face, we should must turn our other cheek to the smiter. If we are sued in court for our jackets, we should give them our overcoats as well.

If people compel us to walk a mile with them, we should go two miles with them. If somebody seeks to borrow money, we should lend it without question. And what's more, we should love our enemies and persecutors, and do good to them and pray for them.

This is exactly what we see Jesus doing in the course of his ministry, particularly on the cross, when he freely forgave his enemies. But, sad to say, while we might be able to emulate him occasionally, we find it impossible to do so on a consistent basis.

Not least, we persuade ourselves that his way of doing things is utterly impractical – that if we adopted his model, the wheels of industry would cease to turn, government would cease to function and society would disintegrate.

Our complete inability to emulate our Lord does not, of course, take his by surprise. His purpose in the Sermon on the Mount is to demonstrate that there is no way that we can hope to meet God on equal terms – and that our concept of virtuous behavior is tawdry beyond belief when measured against God's own goodness. Our Lord's divine standards of behavior illustrate graphically why we so desperately need Jesus as our mediator when we stand before God's throne. *AMEN*