



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Sixth Sunday After Trinity, July 8th, 2018

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Today's Communion Gospel reading is taken from Jesus' most famous discourse: the Sermon on the Mount. Thanks largely to the disjointed way we read scriptures in church, many folks seem to imagine the Sermon of the Mount consists solely of the "Blessed art those . . ." formally known as "beatitudes".

However, the passage that begins "Jesus said . . . Except your righteousness shall exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the Kingdom of Heaven" is just as important a part of the Sermon on the Mount as the Beatitudes – not least because it is one of the main reasons why Jesus lost much of his popularity.

St. Matthew's Gospel is 28 chapters long, while St. Luke's runs to 24 chapters. The Sermon on the Mount begins in the fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel and in the sixth chapter of St. Luke's.

Because of this, many people labor under the impression the sermon was delivered early in Jesus' ministry. This, however, is because today's history books follow the modern convention of dealing with history in a strictly chronological manner.

Classical historians – the great Athenian historian Thucydides, for example, and even a number of more prescient modern historians – would have found the notion of recording history in strict chronological sequence absurd and confusing. They knew that, in many instances, a thorough grasp of the central events of history is crucial to

understanding the beginning and the end. And such is the case with the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount was delivered at the very peak of Jesus' popularity, a couple of years or so into his ministry. St. Matthew and St. Luke relate the event early in their Gospel narratives, so that – from the very outset of our Christ Journey – we can learn from his own lips why Jesus' teachings were so controversial and, ultimately, so unpopular.

After all, it wasn't solely the scribes and Pharisees who howled for Jesus' blood on the first Good Friday. The ordinary people wanted him dead just as badly. The Sermon on the Mount shows why.

To understand what was going on, it's important to know that the people who attended his great teach-in by the Sea of Galilee were not the First Century equivalent of our modern religious right. Many of the folks who'd followed him into the hills probably attended synagogue fairly regularly, but few of them observed Jewish Law as meticulously as the Pharisees. Many of them, in fact, were apostates and collaborators with the enemy – "publicans and sinners" as they are called in the Gospels – who scarcely bothered to observe Jewish law at all.

In short his audience was composed largely of people who were tolerant of their neighbors, who lived and let live, and who didn't try to impose their views on other people. They were the type

of folk who liked to lie in bed of a Sabbath morning, but who knew God wouldn't hold it against them because they were basically decent people who would go out of their way to harm anybody.

By no means all of them were trailing after Jesus out of any misplaced sense of piety – nothing embarrassing like that. A goodly number, of course, were indeed following him because they were genuinely interested in what he had to say.

But the Gospels imply that many more were fascinated by the miracles he performed and the shriekingly funny way he beat up on the religious right. It was, after all, thoroughly refreshing to see the snobbish, holier-than-thou Pharisees getting their comeuppance – being called “hypocrites, blind guides and whited sepulchers” – and being made to look like fools.

The crowd that gathered around Jesus to hear the Sermon on the Mount no doubt expected to hear more of the same. They looked forward to being patted on the back and called salt of the earth, and to getting a good laugh at the expense of the puritanical Pharisees for nit-picking the Law of Moses.

Imagine, then, their surprise when they found themselves on the receiving end – when they heard Jesus tell them: “Don't be so naïve as to imagine that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to complete. It tell you this: so long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter, not a stroke, will disappear from the law until all that must happen has happened.

“If any man therefore sets aside even the least of the Law's demands, and teaches others to do the same, he will have the lowest place in the kingdom of Heaven. On the other hand, anyone who keeps the Law and teaches others to do the same will stand high in the kingdom of Heaven.”

Then came the bitterest blow of all. “Let me tell you,” said Jesus, “Unless you show yourselves to be far better men than the Pharisees and the doctors of the Law, you can never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This was stunning news – for nobody could have been more meticulous in observing the law than the Pharisees. They tithed to the last cent and the last sprig of mint. They rigorously fasted one day a week more than the law demanded.

They observed with the utmost severity the ban on working on the Sabbath Day. Pharisees who fell ill wouldn't call the doctor until the Sabbath was over. Pharisees who'd lost their nearest and dearest, wouldn't pollute the Sabbath by expressing their sorrow.

Jesus was well aware of this, of course. He'd been raised in a Pharisee household. His much older stepbrothers, James and Jude, were actually leading Pharisees. But what Jesus was telling his audience (and ourselves) is that not one of us can hope to measure up to God standards of perfection – no matter how hard we try.

Even if we measure up to the standards set by the Pharisees – standards that are impossibly high – we will still fall far short of God's standard of perfection. Even the Pharisees themselves could only measure up to the standards they set by giving themselves “Mulligans” – by “creatively” twisting the rules.

But Jesus was declaring that the Law of Moses was not the means of achieving salvation, but rather a measure by which people can gauge how far they fall short. In other words, Jesus' message in the Sermon on The Mount is that there is no way for us to achieve salvation by our own efforts. In other words, being “good people” won't save us.

This was not at all the news that his listeners people wanted to hear. And, ultimately, it was their disappointment with this message brought him to Golgotha and his death upon the cross.

Actually, it's more than a little ironical, when you come to think of it, that our all-too-human dissatisfaction with the way God ordains our affairs brought about the great act that guarantees the salvation of all who trust in him – the act described in the liturgy as the “full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.” *AMEN.*