

Epiphany V: Matthew 5:13-24: What Constitutes True Righteousness

1. This text actually has three parts:
 - a) Vss. 13-16: The Christian's exalted calling in the world;
 - b) Vss. 17-20: True righteousness is in keeping with the proper exposition of Scripture;
 - c) Vss. 21-24: An example of true righteousness which follows from proper exposition of Scripture. There is a lot of material in this pericope. Perhaps the preacher will choose only one section for his sermon.
2. Vs. 13: ὑμεῖς, emphatic and placed emphatically forward. "You" means "you Christians only". Faith in Christ is presupposed. τῆς γῆς is a combination of objective and advantage genitive. τὸ ἄλλας is metaphorical. Just as salt preserves food against corruption, so Christians preserve the earth from corruption. If it were not for the preserving power of Christians, mankind would become a Sodom and Gomorrah. It involves a constant battle. Think of how Christians battle abortion, homosexuality, divorce, crookedness in business, etc. ἐάν introduces a future more vivid condition, denoting possible contingency. Ylvisaker quotes Pliny: "Without salt, human life cannot continue to live." μωρανθή denotes loss of primary quality. NIV: "loses its saltiness". The second part of this vs. denotes its utter worthlessness. The point of comparison: "If a Christian loses or forfeits his ability to counter worldly corruption he is worthless in God's sight." A stern warning not to live after the flesh. Cf. Gal. 5:19-21.
3. Vs. 14: Another emphatic ὑμεῖς. The genitive is like that in vs. 13. κόσμος involves all people. Jesus is the Light of the world par excellence, Jn. 8:12. Christians are a reflection of Him. 14b corresponds to 13b. To hide what we are in Christ is not only illogical but dangerous. It amounts to denial. This is the first illustration for 14a.
4. Vs. 15: Now follows a second illustration. 15a denotes a most ridiculous situation. Who would do that? In application it means to hide one's beliefs and convictions. ἀλλά, following a negative means "quite to the contrary". A light is necessary for all in the house and is not lessened by the number.
5. Vs. 16: οὕτως and ὅπως are correlatives. οὕτως means "in such a way". ὑμῶν is possessive genitive. It is a gift of God and belongs to the Christian. ἔμπροσθεν: "in the plain sight of". ἀνθρώπων means "people". ὅπως introduces a purpose clause. The next genitive is of source. καλὰ literally means "beautiful". καὶ "and thus". The final ὑμῶν denotes relationship. In good works men see a Christian's relationship to the Father. Note that it is "Father" and not "God". Unregenerate man can see God at work in nature. But they become aware of Him as a heavenly Father through the works of the believer. This does not mean that they are thus converted but it does indicate that the works of a Christian reflect the fact that God is the Christian's gracious Father. ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς is adjectival. It indicates what kind of Father He is. Men are to see the Christian's works, not the person. Thus they are to glorify the heavenly Father, not the person doing them. The flesh desires to attract attention to self, not the works and the heavenly Father. δοξάσωσιν means to "clothe in splendor". The good works of a Christian cause men, all people, to recognize God as a glorious, gracious, heavenly Father.
6. Vs. 17: Jesus' enemies had accused Him of breaking the Law, Jn. 5:16, and of living a loose life, Lk. 7:34. Evidently Jesus' disciples were in danger of believing this. Jesus counters with "Don't ever get the idea that I've come to break the Law or the Prophets." It was a vicious charge against Jesus. ἦλθον implies the divinity of Jesus, His pre-existence. καταλῦσαι denotes purpose. The translations variously translate: "destroy, abolish, to do away with, set aside." The Scribes and Pharisees taught

the people that they, not Jesus, kept the Law. It was the other way around. ἄλλᾶ, following a negative, is very strong: "on the contrary". Does πληρῶσαι denote Jesus as Prophet, the author and correct expounder of the OT, or does it denote Jesus as Priest, the one Who fulfilled the whole OT by His active and passive obedience? Luther and the Reformers took the former view. Later Lutherans took the latter view. These notes take the view of Luther because the context requires this. He came not to do away with OT teachings but to bring out their true, original meaning. He is not a new Law-giver.

7. Vs. 18: γάρ explains. "Verily I say to you (disciples)." This denotes Jesus' divinity, His divine authority. Only God could say what is said in vs. 18. Note that we have a complex sentence with two ἕως clauses, one before and one after, the main clause. The first denotes all of history until the end of time and the second the complete fulfillment of all that Scripture says in time. The first denotes the permanence of the Word, the second its exact truthfulness. A ἰῶτα is the Hebrew yod, the smallest letter in the alphabet. A κεφαῖα denotes a mark by which one letter is distinguished from another as the letter beth from kaph, or a vowel point or an accent. These little matters, if removed, can change the meaning of a text. Jesus is saying that the true, intended sense of the Law and the Prophets are permanent. The OT Prophets said: "Thus saith the Lord." The Apostles said: "It is written." But Jesus and Jesus alone said: "I say unto you." He, true God, is the author of Scripture and warns man never to change Scripture, even in the slightest.

8. Vs. 19: οὖν is inferential "therefore", meaning "in view of what I have just said." The two complex sentences in this vs. are general conditions, applying in all cases. "Whoever", it makes no difference who. Compare the two complex sentences. Note contrast between λύση-διδάξη and ποιήση-διδάξη. In the first complex sentence the subjunctive verbs are each followed by direct objects, but in the second there is none. In the apodoses the predicate adjectives ἐλάχιστος and μέγας are thrown forward for emphasis. κληθήσεται, future passive with God as agent, is found in both. God is Judge and will make His judgment plain to men. "The Kingdom of heaven" should not be limited to everlasting life, though it surely is included. μίον means "just one". τῶν ἐντολῶν is partitive genitive. This noun means more than the moral law. As in Jn. 14:15 it means any injunction of God, be it Law or Gospel. ἐλάχιστον does not mean that some doctrines are less important than others. It means that because false teachers consider them less, they break them by teaching men falsely. That man will be called "least" in the Kingdom of heaven, which means he is condemned. If he twists and breaks God's injunctions and teaches people in this way, God will judge him accordingly. Fearsome Law! The first complex sentence is a warning, the second a promise. ποιήση καὶ διδάξη "does and teaches" is the very combination which is used of Jesus at Acts 1:1. To be a teacher of God's Word is an awesome responsibility. All Christians, and especially preachers, ought heed vs. 19 most carefully. False teachers lead people on the road to hell.

9. Vs. 20: γάρ is again explanatory. It implies that the Scribes and Pharisees (note that there is only one article with both) twisted, broke and wrongly taught the Word. λέγω ὑμῖν, as in vs. 18, is another reminder of the divinity and divine authority of Jesus. ὑμῶν and τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων are adjectival genitives, distinguishing the two righteousness. Note position of ὑμῶν. What was the righteousness of Scribes and Pharisees? Read Lk. 16:15. It was the righteousness of self-justification, self-righteousness. Read Phil. 3:4-9. Paul looked back on his life as a Pharisee and was horrified at his self-righteousness, calling it dung, manure, repulsive. The impenitent impute false righteousness to themselves. The penitent cling to the imputed righteousness of Christ. Here in vs. 20 Jesus does not say that the Scribes and Pharisees are truly righteous. Bengel notes that Jesus does not honor them with inserting the word "righteousness" after the word πλεῖον where it would be expected. οὐ μὴ with the subjunctive is a very strong negative. By the way, this part of the sentence is not only

eschatological. It applies to this life too. Do not let the self-righteous delude themselves as did the Scribes and Pharisees. Bengel says at this point: "Our righteousness, even though it should satisfy, could never exceed the requirements of the Law; but the Scribes and Pharisees thought that theirs did so. We are bound to surpass their righteousness. . . . This language does not make void the righteousness of faith. . . . Our Lord does not command the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, who observed ceremonial and legal but neglected moral righteousness. The Pharisees urged traditions, the Scribes the letter (as opposed to the spirit) of the Law. It seemed to be especially the part of the Scribes to teach, of the Pharisees to do."

10. Vs. 21: Now follows an example of the false teaching and false righteousness of Scribes and Pharisees. ἠκούσατε, in the synagogues. τοῖς ἀρχαίοις not "by" the ancients (AV) but "to" the ancients (all other translations, including NKJV). The commandment "Thou shalt not kill" was correctly quoted but limited in application to mere externals, making it merely a civil not a moral commandment. Fahling: "The commandment of God was made a mere external legal enactment (penalty found at Gen. 9:5.6; Lev. 24:7; Num. 35:16ff)." Bengel: "The Scribes wished to appear to be in conformity with the ancient and primitive rule. Antiquity should be maintained, but it should be genuine antiquity." He adds: "Our Lord begins with the most pertinent precept" to which Lenski adds: "The one of whose fulfillment the Scribes and Pharisees most likely boasted especially."
11. Vs. 22: δὲ plainly "but". Note emphatic ἐγὼ. Jesus is not a new Lawgiver, nor is He adding to what Moses said. λέγω ὑμῖν denotes His divine authority. He was the author of this law and now is about to explain what He meant when He gave this law through Moses. πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος, no exceptions. Note that the participle is present tense, denoting a continued state of anger, a malicious grudge. Here all commentators quote I Jn. 3:15. Jesus is talking about hatred, murder of the heart, not of the hand. "With his brother" means "his neighbor", anyone. Note that ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει is repeated from the previous verse. Though the translations vary, AV, NKJV, Phillips, RSV, TEV, NIV, JB, NEB and AAT translate the two with the same words. NASB is to be faulted because it translates them differently. The point Jesus is making is that murder of the heart is exactly as serious as is murder of the hand. Two conditional relative clauses follow this sentence. Note ὅς δ' ἔν "whoever", repeated from vs. 21, covers all cases. And note that ἔνοχος occurs once with reference to murder but three times with reference to continued anger. All should be translated "guilty". A murderer is guilty. He should be put to death. But continued anger is even worse. It leads, in the final analysis, to hell-fire. In vs. 22 Jesus is not talking about three different kinds of sin. He is speaking of the progressive danger, first before men and then finally before God, leading to eternal damnation. These notes do not agree with Zahn and Lenski that Jesus is satirizing the casuistry of Scribes and Pharisees. He is speaking about the utter danger of nursing hatred, a grudge. And now a difficult question. The Koine text, followed by AV and NKJV, has the variant "without a cause" in vs. 22. Ylvisaker, Lenski, Stoeckhardt and Kretzmann pass over it in silence. Bengel absolutely rejects it. But Fahling says: "Jesus explains that unrighteous anger, anger directed not against the sin (holy wrath), but against one's neighbor, insulting language and utter disregard for a fellow-man's position in the sight of God was in God's sight an offense equal to murder and punishable by the fires of hell." In a fnt. he adds: "εἰκῆ, missing in many MSS. But whether genuine or not, this word expressed the true sense. Eph. 4:26." Eph. 4:26.27 reads "Be ye angry (the same verb as in Mt. 5:22) and sin not. Let not the sun go down upon your wrath, neither give place to the devil." The point that Fahling is making (in favor of reading the variant) is that Jesus and Paul are warning us against continued, destructive anger which turns into hatred. Neither Fahling nor these notes are advocating anger, for it is dangerous. But it is remarkable that ὀργή is not listed by Paul in Gal. 5:19-21 as a work of the flesh. The new man (Gal. 5:22-23) must always rule the person. In any case, I Jn. 3:15 always applies. Hatred is a destructive passion, a work of the flesh. If not repented of, it leads to hell.

12. Vs. 23: οὖν "therefore" "in view of what was said in vss. 20-21." Now follows a future more vivid condition which means that it is likely to happen. προσφέρῃς is pres. subjunctive "if you are in the process of offering," and μνησθῆς is aorist "if you recall". Under the Old Covenant, people went to the temple or tabernacle to offer sacrifices for sins committed. ὁ ἀδελφός σου means "your neighbor", anyone. "Has anything against you" includes, but is even broader than, what was said in vs. 22. It denotes what you have done against someone else.
13. Vs. 24: Note the three imperatives: "leave, go, be reconciled", all aorists. Even our most sacred duties must be interrupted if our conscience recalls a sin we've committed against someone. That may prove embarrassing, but must be done. Anything else is abomination before God. Note πρῶτον, before doing anything else. The text implies that if your brother refuses to forgive you, you are not at fault. τότε is correlative to πρῶτον. ἔλθων: Bengel remarks that the suppliant is going as if he had not been to the altar before. It does not occur in vs. 23.
14. What lies at the heart of this whole text is constant repentance. The contrite sinner clings to the promises of God which declare him righteous for Jesus' sake. Such a person will give evidence of true righteousness as salt, 13, as light, 14, doing and teaching the Word correctly, 19, being a living example of true righteousness, 20, applying the moral law to the heart, not merely to externals, 22, and being of a constant forgiving spirit, 23-24.