

“For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remember that thy brother hath ought against thee, Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily, I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.”—Matt. 5:20-26.

**TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS
A Sermon by Theodor Zahn**

Our Lord and Master places two alternatives before us in our text, and we have to choose between them as long as we tread the path of this life. The one alternative is the Kingdom of Heaven; and its gates only open to true and genuine righteousness. The other alternative is a prison from which there is no release, because no one can pay the debt which brought him to this prison. But is it necessary to preach of such things in a Christian community? That there is a heaven for the good and pious, and a hell for the wicked and godless, are among the first things our children learn; and grown persons prove, by coming to church, that they have not forgotten and do not wish to forget these elementary truths. We might think that such things should be preached out of doors, in the streets, the taverns, the railway carriages, perhaps also in studies where no Bible is to be found; we might think that the terrors of hell should be dwelt upon and the way to heaven pointed out to the careless and unbelieving who do not care about heaven and hell—but not to the people who come here to the House of God and gather together in the Name of Jesus for believing prayer and devout meditation on His Word.

Our Lord Christ thought differently. He spoke these words to His faithful disciples. In the whole glorious Sermon on the Mount, of which our text forms a part, it was the Twelve Apostles, whom He had just chosen, that He was teaching. All who were present might listen, but it was addressed to His enthusiastic followers. It was to those whom He had called blessed, of whom He had spoken as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and whom He had pointed out as the children of His Heavenly Father, that these solemn words were addressed: “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” And it was they whom He warned against the guilt which leads to the eternal prison.

The disciples and confessors of Jesus need such a warning, and they only really understand it. Therefore we will not refuse to listen to what these words have to say to us today, if we really wish to be His disciples. No one will become a disciple merely by hearing the sermon of our Lord which is our subject for today. It is only by the operation of the Gospel, working in us contrite confession of our natural corruption and leading us to grasp trustfully the hand of God’s grace, stretched out to save us from destruction, that any of us can become the disciple of Jesus.

The first and immediate hearers of the Sermon on the Mount were thus minded before they heard it, and they had also lived for some time under the powerful influence of the wonderful Master in whose mouth old truths sounded like a new discovery, whose new doctrine foretold a reversal of the order of the world (as it had hitherto been conducted), and who sealed His words by deeds which in themselves looked like a beginning of a new order of things. It was a life differing from that of the righteous under the guidance of the Scribes and Pharisees. Those who were thus allowed to accompany our Lord on His wanderings, as faithful disciples, lived in a higher sphere, a world full of grace and truth, full of joy and hope, full of delight in freedom and a sense of power. They felt released from the petty rules of the Scribes and the tormenting anxiety of the Pharisees.

Where God does such wonders and allows them to be proclaimed, it seems as though such severe duty, such hard work, and such strict rules were no longer necessary for man. But the King of the Kingdom of Heaven, who holds in His hands the keys of heaven and of hell, raises His voice in warning and says: "Think not that I am come to set aside the requirements of God on man's will and works. Do not imagine that your religious enthusiasm will bear you as on wings to the Kingdom of Heaven. Ye are still in the path of duty, of work, of obedience or disobedience to God's holy will, and it is still uncertain how it will be with you at the end of the road. Only the righteous will live. Only he who does the will of God will abide for all eternity." Jesus did not require less of His disciples, but much more than other teachers of morals. He required a righteousness which should exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.

During this hour let us meditate on the righteousness without which we can have no part in the Kingdom of Heaven, that we may all the more earnestly strive after it in our daily life! In our text, the Lord does not at once describe it in all its details. The whole Sermon on the Mount is occupied with this subject. Here, He first shows by the one command, "Thou shalt not kill," how He means the will of God to be done, on the doing of which our salvation depends. And here at once, at the very beginning, the essence of this righteousness and the manner in which it differs from that which only resembles it comes clearly to light.

The righteousness without which none of us can have any part in the eternal Kingdom of God is, first, not the piety which is sufficient of itself alone, but a love of mankind which proceeds from it. Secondly, this righteousness does not consist in the fulfilment of this or that commandment, but in giving up the heart to the will of God, whose whole law rests upon the command of love.

1. Jesus did not find in the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees the righteousness which He required of His disciples. Better and very different in kind from theirs is the righteousness that will be required at the gates of heaven. We must remember what kind of people the Scribes and Pharisees were, who so often meet us in the Gospel. We find the Lord generally in antagonism to them. They often attacked Him ruthlessly, and He often rebuked them ruthlessly. It is no wonder that neither Scribe nor Pharisee is a name that sounds well in Christian ears. But we must not forget that it was a Scribe to whom Jesus once said, "Thou art not far from the Kingdom of God," and that it was a youth of a truly Pharisaical disposition that He once looked upon lovingly, as we are told in the Gospel of Mark, and to whom He said that he only lacked one thing.

If the latter, like the former, did not take the last decisive step, there were others from their circles who did. We see the Pharisee Nicodemus advancing step-by-step in adoration of Jesus, and in courage to confess Him. Paul, too, from a Pharisee became a great Apostle. And as a

Christian he not only repented of the guilt he had incurred as a Pharisee and a persecutor of the Christian community, but he avowed also, when a Christian, "I am a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee," and he rejoiced that from his youth he had served God with a clear conscience. The Scribes were the theologians of the Jewish people at that time, the teachers of religion in the synagogues and in the lecture halls both of the higher and elementary schools. They searched the Scriptures with unwearied diligence, and, in their way, held them in high esteem. But the Pharisees formed the wider circle of those who strove to carry out the teaching of the Scribes in daily life. Their whole lives were to be fashioned by the Law. They wished to keep themselves unspotted by the abominations of heathenish customs and immorality, which for centuries past had tried to force their way among the Jewish people. They were exact in the performance of all their religious duties, in their visits to the Temple and the synagogue, in the offering of sacrifices, in fasting and prayer, in keeping the Sabbath holy, and in the observance of the hours of prayer. The letter of the Law was to become life, and all the customs and institutions that had been developed by the wisdom of their forefathers were to be fostered as a bulwark of legal righteousness.

In short, the Pharisees were more righteous than all others, and their pious zeal was handed down in their circles as the best family possession. They judged others severely, but nevertheless it was not only the lost sons of their people that they thus judged, but the firstborn also, who had remained outwardly in the Father's House, the priests and high-priests who were worldly and did not walk worthily of their calling. In troublous times these Pharisees had proved more than once that they were not only righteous in word but also in deed; yea, that they were men ready to give their lives for the honor of their God and the sanctity of His Law.

But one thing was lacking in them, and that was just the chief part of the Law—love, love which flows forth of itself from true piety. They strove after righteousness, they sought it, and they imagined that they had found it by joining in the public worship of God with fervour, and by fashioning their lives exactly in accordance with the principles of the faith--in short, in a piety which is sufficient unto itself. Therefore Jesus said to His disciples: "If your righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." Therefore He says to the conscience of every one: "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has ought against you, leave there your gift before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

Whoever goes to the altar of God seeks first of all the presence of God, that he may thank Him for His goodness and pray to Him for His grace; that he may make his peace with God when he has been troubled by sin, in order that in God his soul may regain its serenity, of which the restlessness of the world had robbed it. It is also quite true that in the public worship of God, and even in common prayer, each individual has to do with his God and with Him alone. It is well that we should not allow the eyes of the mind to wander hither and thither during Divine service, but should collect our thoughts and fix them on God only. But he greatly deceives himself who imagines that with no love in his heart for his fellow men, he may appear in the assembled congregation before that God who Himself is Love. He deceives himself who imagines that when through his own fault he is living at variance with his neighbor, he can find peace for his soul in the God of peace and mercy.

All such worship of God is vain, a very abomination to God; and the piety which finds satisfaction in such services is not righteousness and does not make for righteousness. The House of Prayer is transformed for such a man into a judgment hall, and the mercy seat into the tribunal of a

severe judge, who condemns the hypocrite and delivers him over to the prison, and who only receives into His kingdom of glory the souls which draw near to the altar in sincere love to God and the brethren. So the Lord taught His disciples, and so He speaks to us also. After all, there was nothing really new in what Jesus said. Truth is eternal, and has never been without witnesses. Even the prophets of the Old Covenant bore witness against those who imagined they could find righteousness in the constant worship of God. "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me?" said the Lord by Isaiah. "Who has required this at your hand to tread My courts?" And when, conscious of their guilt, the people sought out new services and unheard-of sacrifices whereby they might appease an angry God, the Prophet Micah replied: "It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you, namely, to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

The Pharisees were also acquainted with these words of God and held them sacred like all else that was written in their Bible. And yet, when the true Scribe and the truly righteous Man bore witness, in the spirit of the old Prophets, against the hypocritical righteousness of the religious men of His time, it sounded like a new revelation. Men may grasp outwardly the deepest and most spiritual truths, while at the same time they elude their inward power. The Pharisees said that to practice love was to give alms; to keep God's Word meant knowing the Commandments, and guarding against every transgression of their literal sense. This may be done heartlessly and unlovingly, and yet the semblance of righteousness be complete.

We, as Christians, hear the witness of Christ, which is greater than that of the old prophets. Do you imagine that we are therefore safe from the hypocritical righteousness of the Pharisees? We appear before God's altar whenever we go to church. On that altar we offer the sacrifice of our prayers and our confession to God. The only question is, With what thoughts do we go there? We can scarcely accuse ourselves of having been so much occupied with ourselves and our God on our way to church that we were not able to think of our fellow men and our relations with them. In general we think quite enough about other people. We meet them on the way to church, we see each other in church. We even take off our hats to those with whom we are not on the best of terms. The question is, What are the thoughts which then fill our hearts? I am afraid that we think ten times oftener of all that we have against others, of our accusations and our complaints against them, than we think of all that they have against us. If [only] we would but think in the right way of what we have against others, of their faults in general, or of the injury they may have done us!

We celebrate no Divine service without the Lord's Prayer; and we never have the Lord's Prayer without the petition, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." We cannot say these words without lying, and we cannot go to church without hypocrisy, if every thought of the faults and injustice of our neighbors has not been at once accompanied by the other thought, "I am not the judge, neither will I be the accuser of my brother before God. He has enough to bear in his own guilt, as I have in mine. I forgive him willingly, as truly as I pray to God that He will cast all my sins into the sea of His forgiving mercy." This is so self evident that we say it as a matter of course in the Lord's Prayer. And yet, while on his way to church, one Christian will bear a grudge against another and will keep count of his slips; and yet he is wishing to be religious and imagining that he is righteous. Such service of God is vain. Such piety is hypocrisy. Such righteousness is unreal, because love is lacking.

Love, without which no piety or righteousness can exist, is not long in answering the question, "What have I against my neighbor?" It first asks, "What has he against me? What complaint has

he to make against me? What can I do to gain a feeling of love and confidence in him?" If at any time such thoughts ought to be ours, surely they would be most fitting on our way to church. If such a thought arises in any man's mind, and he drives it away again, then the Lord meets him and says, "It were better to return to your house than to desecrate My House! It were better to be silent, or to talk of all kinds of vanity, than to stain your lips with hypocritical praise and prayer. Perhaps he who, through your fault, is estranged from you has already forgiven you in his heart. Perhaps he is silent to you and prays for you. You find the way too long to go to him and to say to him, 'Forgive me,' and yet you find the way to God so short and easy. But God holds Himself afar from hypocrites. He is only near to those who call upon Him in sincerity and truth, with hearts full of love and the need of love."

These words of our Lord before which we arraign ourselves today have not been without influence on Christian practice. The practice has not yet died out among religious people of examining and questioning themselves before going to the Altar to receive the Holy Communion, whether they have done a wrong to any one. Would it not be well if, sometimes during these days of confession and preparation for the Lord's Supper, we were to go to others and ask for their forgiveness? And yet where pious practices and habits are inherited in families and in wider circles, the danger of Pharisaical hypocrisy lies close at hand. We must, therefore, ask ourselves at all times whether we are acting like those who knew and confessed the holiest commandments, but who managed to come to terms with themselves by outward actions and a dead formula while their hearts remained far from the brother who should to be reconciled, from the God whom they strove to serve, and from the will of God which outwardly they appeared to fulfil.

2. The righteousness without which none of us can enter into the Kingdom of Heaven is not an outward fulfilment of this or that commandment of God or of Christ, but the surrender of the heart to the will of God, who is Love and who requires love. The Lord teaches us this in the first half of our Gospel. In the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," He shows what a very different kind of righteousness His disciples must have from the righteousness taught by the Scribes and practiced by the Pharisees. The Scribes enjoined this commandment, like all the others, on the people and, in order to make it all the more forcible, they drew attention to the punishment for murder and manslaughter appointed by the civil judicial authorities. With reference to the commandment itself, they allowed themselves to be satisfied with asserting what was *forbidden* by God in it, while they neglected to inquire and find out what God really *commanded*--what conduct was righteous and well pleasing to God, and what God required of all His people when He forbade murder. Therefore, as there are never more than a few men who are tempted to take the lives of their neighbors by violence, this commandment very soon became inoperative for the community of the righteous. And indeed, when thus explained, all the Ten Commandments only serve to increase the pride of respectable people, who have not become murderers, adulterers, and thieves; and who may imagine, therefore, that they are upright, and have done all that God commands, and are well pleasing to God when they appear before His Altar.

This delusion, so deadly to souls, was destroyed by the Lord when He said, "Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." The Lawgiver and Judge in heaven does not let His eye rest on anything external. It may deceive men, but He looks on the heart where the passions rise and from whence the thoughts proceed as words and deeds. And the true Interpreter of the Law of God here proclaims that it is the will and judgment of His Father, that anger, aroused in a loveless heart against a brother, is one and the same as an act of murder. It is true, indeed, that as we listen to the Lord, as He goes on speaking of the man who calls his brother "Raca" and of that other who says to him "Thou fool," it almost seems as though

the Lord were Himself just such a Scribe of these times, just such a subtle Rabbi as those whom He denounced for their teaching, which so misrepresented the Word of God. For what difference does it make whether a man suppresses his resentment or attacks another with harsh words, or uses some insulting expression in giving vent to his anger? Or can it be the meaning of Jesus that he only is deserving of the anger and punishment of God who says "Thou fool," while a second man who uses some other insulting word, or a third who reveals his contempt by a silent scornful glance, will only come under the judgment of man? Our Lord was certainly a Scribe, but not like those who cavilled at the Word of God, splitting hairs and thereby destroying its essence and its power. The people of Galilee were well able to understand Him. They were convicted and their hearts were touched by His words, and they judged that He spoke with power and not as the Scribes.

Jesus spoke more than once using the formulas of the learned Scribes of that day. But He did so only to destroy such formulas by the power of the truth which flowed forth from His heart, which He recognized in every word of His God and Father, and which He allowed to stream forth in irresistible power into the hearts and consciences of those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness. Souls like these understood Him naturally--even when in epigrammatic riddles, or in dark similitudes, or in bold examples He proclaimed the truth which God hides from the wise and prudent, but reveals to the simple hearted, the sincere, and the longing. The specious hypocrite asks, "What can I allow myself to do in the presence of God's law? How far may I follow my heart's desires without ceasing to be righteous and to be accounted as such?" Whoever longs for true righteousness and for God Himself asks, "What will He who sees the heart have me to do?"

Such a hearer of the sermon on true righteousness recognizes at once, in the outward act which the Law condemns, the heart's desire, which under certain circumstances would lead on to the horrible deed. He knows that a man in a corner of his heart may cherish thoughts that may be more loveless and murderous than those of many a man-slayer have been; and that hatred can spurt out more poison in one word than a passionate man may have in his heart when he seizes the knife. If we could bring thoughts to judgment, if we could weigh and test the amount of hatred in words, we should find many murderers among those who wish to be religious. For he who does not love his brother hates him, and he who hates him is a murderer.

Our righteousness must be better than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, better than that of many Scribes and many righteous men of today. This means that first of all it must be true; then it will become perfect. To whom much is given, of him will much be required. To us Christians much has been given, infinitely more than the Law which was given by Moses to the people of God. To us is given grace and truth, which came by Jesus Christ. And how much have we, who cling to Christ's community and so often hear the Word of Christ, how much more have we than those who have given it all up! We cannot say that we do not know what the righteousness is that God requires of us. His truth has been made known to us, and His mercy has been proclaimed to us. God requires nothing of us for which He will not willingly and richly give the strength to those who call on Him as their Heavenly Father in the Name of His Son. He does not require this or that service or virtue. He does not demand heroic deeds such as only a few can succeed in accomplishing. He requires only one thing--that we give up our fruitless efforts to deceive Him, and in exchange surrender ourselves to His will in single-heartedness.

If we are still terrified by the words, "Whosoever shall say to his brother, 'Thou fool,' shall be in danger of hell-fire"; if we acknowledge that we too ought to be called murderers, if [since] even

unholy anger makes a man a murderer; [then] do not let us evade the truth because it gives us pain, but [rather, let us] thank God that He judges us in this life. And if at any time our consciences cause us serious anxiety because of our want [lack] of love, let us think of the actual murderer who hung on the cross at Golgotha beside the Lord. He acknowledged the righteousness of the judgment of God, and his own unrighteousness in that mirror of innocence--the Saviour crucified beside him. Other men may ask in doubt if the righteousness of this robber were better than the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. The Holy King of the Kingdom of Heaven found the righteousness in this robber, without which none can enter into the Kingdom of God; and He opened the gates of Paradise for him. Whoever is satisfied with a religion without love and a righteousness without resignation of the heart to the holy and gracious will of God, will not come to life. Blessed are they, on the contrary, who hunger and thirst after righteousness. They do not hunger and thirst in vain; they shall be satisfied. Amen.