

[Entering Into Greatness Part 2](#)

In [Part 1](#) we learned that to *enter into the kingdom of heaven* means to live the kingdom lifestyle now, as defined by Jesus, which then qualifies one to inherit the millennial kingdom in the world to come. As discussed in the [previous article](#), I believe Jesus is speaking of matters of sanctification rather than salvation.

What is the kingdom lifestyle? Jesus answers that question throughout the book of Matthew, but most intensively in the Sermon on the Mount. In chapters five through seven, and particularly in the Beatitudes ([Matt. 5:3-12](#)), Jesus teaches His disciples how they should live if they would enter into the kingdom way of living. We discussed those requirements in a previous series entitled [Seek First the Kingdom](#).

In the context, it seems Jesus is teaching that a believer fulfills the law to the extent he is living out the virtues of the Beatitudes. Of course, we realize the only way that can happen is when a child of God chooses to appropriate the provision of Christ living within. We will come back to that thought at the conclusion of the article.

For now, we need to take note how Jesus summarizes His initial teaching on discipleship:

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 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 ([Matthew 5:19-20](#)).

In order to enter into the kingdom of heaven, a child of God must live in such a way that his righteousness exceeds (literally, surpasses) the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Again, I would challenge the reader not to think of *entering into the kingdom of heaven* as getting saved and/or going to heaven, but rather as living the kingdom lifestyle now with a view to inheriting the future millennial kingdom. Inheriting, I believe, is the idea of ruling with Christ in His kingdom as opposed to dwelling in the kingdom as a mere subject. I discussed that concept more fully in a previous article, entitled [Two Inheritances](#).

In the context of Matthew 5, if salvation from eternal condemnation is in view, then it would seem that keeping the Beatitudes (i.e., having righteousness that surpasses the Pharisees) would be a works-based salvation. Of course, Jesus is not teaching salvation by merit. This dilemma is resolved if we understand the passage to be referring to progressive sanctification.

If our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees, then we must

understand the nature of Pharisaical righteousness. That leads to the second of four questions posed in the previous article.

2. What characterizes the “righteousness” of the Pharisees?

Formerly, I read [Matthew 5:19-20](#) with two prejudices. The first one you already know—I assumed entering into the kingdom was a reference to getting saved and going to heaven. The second one was an assumption that virtually all the Jews at the time of Christ were unbelievers, and especially the Pharisees. I now believe those assumptions were incorrect.

It is important to understand that the Jews at the time of Christ were worshiping in the temple, offering animal sacrifices, observing the feasts, and looking for Messiah to come. Could it be said, they were believing God? Is that not how Old Testament people were saved—by believing God?

I now believe multitudes of Jews were already saved people when Jesus arrived on the scene, and thus His primary purpose (as spelled out in the synoptic Gospels) was calling the nation to repentance for their disobedience to God. In other words, He was calling them to a kingdom way of living, for the kingdom of heaven (the Messianic kingdom on earth) was at hand (near).

Certainly, Jesus was also concerned with saving lost people, and so we have John’s Gospel that tells of His burden to go after unsaved individuals. But it seems He operated under the assumption that the great need of the nation, as the covenant people of God, was to repent, and return to a kingdom way of living. With the Messianic kingdom in view, much would be at stake!

Many in the nation were living licentiously, while others were living legalistically, and thus the call to repentance. Incidentally, does not licentious behavior and legalistic behavior characterize much of Christianity today, even amongst saved people in our independent, fundamental, Bible-believing churches? What is the problem? Multitudes of Christians have left their first love through fleshly choices. The cares of this world have produced a generation of indifferent Christians who are not looking for their Lord’s return and they are certainly not prepared to rule with Christ in His coming kingdom.

In other words, I would allege the condition of the church of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century is much like the condition of the Jews in the first century, that is, full of believers who need to repent of their misbehavior and return to the kingdom way of life as outlined in the Beatitudes. To ignore such a call by our Lord is consequential, for it will result in a negative verdict at the Judgment Seat and disinheritance from ruling and reigning with Christ in His coming earthly kingdom (the very purpose for our millennial existence!).

Against that important backdrop, we find two cause-and-effect relationships in [Matthew 5:19-20](#) that were originally directed at the disciples of Christ but, by extension ([John 17:20](#)), apply to all future born-again believers, including us.

Cause-Effect Relationships

First-Positive

Cause in v.19: obeying the least commandments (and teaching others so)

Cause in v.20: righteousness surpassing the Pharisees (entering into kingdom living *now*)

Effect in v.19: called *great* in the future millennial kingdom *then* (idea of reward & inheritance *then*)

Second-Negative

Cause in v.19: breaking the least commandments (and teaching others so)

Cause in v.20: righteousness on par with the Pharisees (not entering into kingdom living *now*)

Effect in v.19: called *least* in the future millennial kingdom (idea of recompense & disinheritance *then*)

Lawbreakers will be least in the millennial kingdom! Those who disobey God *now*, will bear the consequences *then*. Indeed, those Christians who break the so-called (by the Pharisees) *least* commandments (in the context, the virtues taught in the Beatitudes), passing them off as unimportant, and teaching others so, will be considered least in the kingdom. That is a frightful warning!

Jesus did not come to annul or abolish the law—He came to fulfill it ([Matt. 5:17](#)). In fact, not one jot or tittle will pass from the law, until all be fulfilled ([Matt. 5:18](#)). In other words, the very least aspects of the moral law of God remain as long as this present heaven and earth remain (and that includes the millennial world). That is what Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, He raises the bar to a higher standard—the law of Christ.

The Pharisees would be least in the kingdom, for they were guilty of breaking what they deemed as least commandments and teaching others to do so as well. To break is to loose from obligation. Jesus did not distinguish between the commandments, but the Pharisees made an artificial distinction and taught by their example that lesser commandments could be broken with impunity. But that is not what [James 2:10](#) says, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” Thus Jesus is warning His disciples that having a Pharisaical mentality and lifestyle will result in not living a kingdom lifestyle now, the ultimate consequence being called least in the kingdom *then*.

We typically think of carnal Christians out in left field, living like the prodigal son, who will be least in the kingdom. But what about carnal Christians out in right field, living like the prodigal son’s brother, the one who never left home but had an air of self-righteousness about him? They

will be least in the kingdom too.

The Pharisees were like that, and I believe fundamental churches often breed pharisaical Christians. What is a pharisaical mentality? Or we could say, what is the “righteousness” of the Pharisees?

In the context of Matthew 5-6 (cf. [Matt. 23:23, 27-28](#)), Jesus condemns the Pharisaical practice of observing the *letter* of the law, while ignoring the *spirit* of the law. In fact, in the following sections of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sorts out that problem. For example, the Pharisees could proudly say, “I have never murdered anyone.” But Jesus teaches that even anger and hatred in the heart are a violation of God’s law ([Matt. 5:22-26](#)). The Pharisees had steered clear of adultery, but Jesus expands the definition of adultery to include lust in the mind ([Matt. 5:27-30](#)). Numerous other illustrations are also given by Christ to illustrate how Pharisaical righteousness falls short of God’s requirement for kingdom living. If one is to be *great* in the coming kingdom, he must choose to live better than the Pharisees here and *now*. In essence, Jesus is saying that one could keep the ten commandments perfectly and still not be living a kingdom way of life.

Here’s the point. If you want to be great in the kingdom, your righteous lifestyle must surpass that of the Pharisees, and that means...

- Your way of living must be characterized by the principles Christ is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.
- You must be obedient to the entire law of Christ.
- You must not merely obey the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law.
- You must obey not merely outwardly, but from the heart.
- You must not add anything to what God requires.
- You must teach others what Jesus teaches.
- Then—and only then—will you be great in the kingdom.

In [Part 3](#) we will examine the provision for living greater than the Pharisees.