

When people try to do what is "right", it can lead to all kinds of wrongs, especially when there is no righteous rule to guide them (and they rely strictly on their own strength and legalism). In Matthew, the antitypes of true righteousness are the Pharisees (the teachers of the law). Not all of them were hypocrites or legalists, however, they were known for their passionate devotion to obeying God's word, which is a noble commitment indeed. However, Jesus criticised them for focusing on selective ways of being "righteous" before God and in the world.

The Pharisees had become used to regulating their behaviours by following certain righteous practices, i.e., eating practices, dress codes, tithings, public prayers etc. But Jesus accused them of failing at hungering and thirsting for righteousness (Matt. 23). They had become comfortable with the way things were. They did not really want the disruptive, in-breaking Kingdom of God. Jesus exclaimed that John reached out to the religious leaders, showing them the way of righteousness" - but they refused to believe. However, it was the tax collectors and prostitutes who took notice and followed (Matt. 21:32). WHY? Despite the fact the Pharisees called them "sinners", these "sinners" KNEW they were corrupted by wickedness and systems of injustice. They knew they were broken people in a broken world. The Pharisees were blind to this. So, ironically Jesus said, "I have come to call not the righteous, but the sinners" (Matt 9:13). The so-called righteous do not hunger for the just kingdom. The sinners listen to Jesus and dream of the blessed world.

From this perspective, it makes all the sense that Jesus called his followers to PURSUE a RIGHTEOUSNESS that "EXCEEDS THAT OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES" in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20). We often mistakenly think that "righteousness" is about being very religious, but by now hopefully it is clear that Jesus's "righteousness" is about the unpredictable, dynamic, Jesus-centred, justice seeking, compassion and mercy filled, anyone-and-everyone-is-welcome, heart and soul piercing kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. The Pharisees believed they had arrived at destination of pleasing God in the righteousness. The sinners who followed Jesus knew there was a long road ahead, but the kingdom door was open to them and hope shined forth.

PRAY: Holy Spirit, my heart is deceptively wicked (Jer.17:9) - search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you and lead me along the path of everlasting life (Psalm 139:23-24).

TONIGHT - PROPHETIC PRAYER NIGHT at 7pm in ICC Newmarket - GLOBAL ISSUES FOCUS from the GENERALS of INTERCESSION & PROPHETIC COUNCIL.

TOMORROW: READ Mark 10:17-31.