

We're in trouble. Big trouble. There is no way we can win this fight. So the Israelites thought as they camped against the Philistine army. It was not the size of the army, nor the place of the battle. No, their problem was different. Their challenge was a nine-foot giant, armed to the teeth. His great size and strength made him a champion, the victor in many battles. This giant, Goliath, came out daily and challenged Israel to a fight. Send one man out to face me, Goliath called, and let that fight settle the battle. Let's spare the bulk of the army from the fighting; let's settle this one on one.

No one in Israel would face Goliath. They were certain that going out to fight him one-on-one was suicide. There was no way they could win. And so they stay put, day after day, week after week. Until a boy, a kid, a shepherd named David takes up the challenge. He enters the fight with confidence. You, Goliath, David says, are dead. You come against me with sword and spear, but I come against you with the Lord God. David, as you well know, went into battle with only a sling and five small stones. With these insignificant weapons, David defeated Goliath.

David saw the battle differently than Goliath, differently than Israel. He measured strength not in human terms, but in divine terms. Viewed from this perspective, victory was assured for David, even when by human standards, it looked like he was doomed. But what counted was not David's strength or weapons. What counted was the Lord. The battle is the Lord's. With the Lord fighting for David, the battle was over before it began. Goliath was slain; David emerged victorious.

Like Israel, cowering at Goliath's words, we hear Jesus' words and may think: we're doomed. For what does He say? "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and

Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” More righteous than the Pharisees and scribes? They knew God's law backwards and forwards. They strove day and night to keep that law. They were meticulous in observing the law. They would tithe even the herbs grown in their garden! How do you measure up to that? Do you think of God's law day and night? Or have you forgotten even the ten commandments? Are you meticulous in keeping it? Or does it slip your mind completely? Do you let your standards of right and wrong be set by something other than the Lord and His Word?

Even if you are meticulous, Jesus says: It's not good enough. Righteousness means righteousness: absolute perfection. No faults. No slips. No missed opportunities to do good, but good done always to everyone. And not a one of us has done that. No matter how hard we may try, our deeds are tainted and stained by sin. And where does that leave us? On the outside, looking in. It seems that we are in big, big trouble. We may as well pack it in and quit. We are going to fall far short of what God expects and commands us to be.

Such an attitude of despair comes from God's law, taken seriously. You want to be saved by keeping the Law, by what you do? Then you need to be perfect—and you fall short of that. Here is where God's Law leaves us. It leaves us despairing of ourselves and our righteousness. But God's Law is not meant to stand alone for us. Looking at God's law only is like Israel, staring at Goliath in fear. In both cases, there is good reason for fear. But in both cases, there is more to the story. Just as David looked past the fear to rely on the Lord and His strength, so we must look beyond the despair of the Law to the hope and forgiveness that come through Christ. We must turn our ears to hear the good news of the Gospel.

The righteousness that we need, that which surpasses the scribes and Pharisees, is given freely to us in Christ Jesus. Yes, we do and ought to despair of attaining such righteousness on

our own. But we rejoice that what we cannot attain ourselves is given to us freely in Christ Jesus. He supplies what we are lacking; He supplies what we truly need.

This righteousness was won by Jesus through His life in this world. Here He kept God's law without fault or blemish. Here he lived with no mistakes, no faults; here He took every opportunity to do good. He truly kept the Law, perfectly. The scribes and Pharisees could not do this. They could only fool themselves into thinking that they kept the law perfectly. They could do this only by ignoring the greater commandments, only by picking and choosing which commandments they could keep. In the end, they fell short, for they put themselves and their own works ahead of the Lord; they loved themselves more than Him. They saw no need for His help, but relied solely on themselves and their own work for righteousness and life.

Where they failed, Christ succeeded. And His obedience is counted as ours; His work on our behalf benefits us. Think again of David. It was the Lord who defeated Goliath; yet David receives the spoils of the victory; He is rewarded as the conqueror. So also with us. Christ wins righteousness for us, and we receive the spoils of His victory. His perfect righteousness blankets and covers us.

As for our sins—all we do wrong—Christ takes these away. He died in our place. He carried those sins to the cross and there shed His blood to win forgiveness for them. This gives us the perfect righteousness needed to enter the kingdom of heaven. This makes us Christ's own blood-bought sons and daughters, cleansed from guilt and sin; counted righteous and holy for Christ's sake.

These blessings are given to us through faith, not by works, not by what we do. We are told of Abraham that He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. So also for us. Through faith in Christ, as we believe in Him, God counts us holy and righteous. The

victory is ours—the victory over sin and death; the spoils of that victory—life in God's heavenly kingdom—is given to us by Jesus.

What then do we do with God's Law? If we are not saved by keeping it, can we then throw it away, or ignore it? By no means! Rather, Christ calls us to obey it. We are to strive to keep His commandments—not to earn our way into heaven, but because we are already members of His heavenly kingdom. Jesus says: Great in the kingdom of heaven is the one who keeps these commands. Here is true and lasting greatness. Here is true and blessed life: found in living according to Christ's commands, confident that our salvation is already won and given to us through faith.

We dare not then relax God's commands, dare not make excuses about why this one or that one is outdated or doesn't apply to me or can simply be broken. For instance, God says: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. That is, church attendance is not optional to the Lord, nor is time spent with His Word. God says: You shall not bear false testimony against your neighbor. Lying, cheating, deceiving: these are not acceptable, and ought to have no place in our lives. Do not think you can make an exception for yourself; the Lord means what He commands. His law does not disappear.

Let us be clear: keeping the Law will not earn us heaven. Christ has done that; He gives us entrance into His kingdom freely through faith. He wipes away all the wrong we do. But He does not then tell us to live as we please, to pile up more sins to be forgiven. Instead, He calls us to turn from sin and walk in His commands. This is the life He lays out for His children—the best life; the life that follows His will. The life that loves Him above all, that loves our neighbor more than ourselves.

To call us to this life, God has given us His Word. His Law shows our sins, and our need

for a Savior, for righteousness coming from outside of us. His Gospel shows us that needed Savior, and the forgiveness and righteousness that He credits to us. This Gospel spurs us on to live as His child, to strive to keep the commandments and order our lives according to them. Let us hear God's Word, read it, learn it, and take it to heart, that He might work through His Word in our lives, that He might lead us to repentance and faith by that very Word.

Hold fast to this word of Christ, for it is your source of life. Cling to the Savior made known in these words. He will sustain you through life, through the valley of the shadow of death, all the way into the eternal rest He has prepared for you and all believers. Look to Him for true righteousness, His holiness that He counts as yours. Seek Him where He may be found, in the very word of life we find in Scripture. Amen.