

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Advent 1

December 2, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

The Lord Our Righteousness

—Jeremiah 33:14-16

In the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). That declaration must have surprised Jesus’ disciples. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were the most righteous people of Jesus’ day. These were people who took their relationship with God very seriously. They made vows of sacrifice to the Lord—and they kept their vows. They committed to separate themselves from everything that defiled body and soul, and they were committed to living a pure and holy life. They studied and searched the Scriptures to know God’s law, and they worked scrupulously at putting that law into practice—following it to the letter. The disciples must have wondered: How could anyone be more righteous than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law?

Yet Jesus says that to get to heaven a person needs to be more righteous. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were not righteous enough to get to heaven. What was it that was causing them to come up short? Was their problem that the vows they made and the gifts they offered were for outward show, so that others could see how righteous they were? Yes, that was a problem. Was their problem that they were obedient on the outside, while on the inside their thoughts and their attitudes and their motives made them like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but rotting on the inside? Yes, that was also the case. Was their problem that their scrupulous devotion to the letter of the law left them lacking in the spirit of love? Yes, they came up short in that area, as well. But the real problem with the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law was that for them it was just that—it was about *their* righteousness. It was about what *they* did to obey God, what *they* did to make themselves right with God, about what *they* offered to God as a righteous life. At the end of the day, they came up short, because *their* righteousness wasn’t enough.

For all their devotion to the Law and the Prophets the Pharisees and teachers of the law missed the parts in the Old Testament where it says, “There is no one righteous, not even one. All have turned away; they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12; Psalm 14; Psalm 53; Ecclesiastes 7:20). The Pharisees could point to others who were living less godly lives than they, but they forgot that God doesn’t let us compare ourselves to other people and pat ourselves on the back with pride because we’re so much more godly than they are. God doesn’t compare us to each other; he compares us to himself. He says, “Be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Jesus underscored this when he said, “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). If you want to get to heaven, that’s where you have to be. Your righteousness has to surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. That’s the standard you have to measure up to, that’s the bar God insists you meet, the standard of absolute perfection, perfect holiness and untarnished righteousness. Otherwise, the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), eternal death.

So how can you and I ever attain the righteousness God demands? How can we ever measure up to the standard God has set? If it depends on our righteousness, the answer is: We can’t. Our righteousness will always fall short. Our obedience to God’s law will always be lacking. Our good works and best efforts will always be insufficient. But in the Scriptures God reveals another way. It’s the way that the Prophet Jeremiah pointed to in the words of our sermon text: “*The days are coming,*” declares the LORD, “*when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.*” Jeremiah promised that someone was coming to solve our eternal problem by being our righteousness. The perfection that we could never achieve for ourselves would be achieved for us by a righteous substitute, a righteous Branch from David’s line, who would do what is just and right. The Lord himself would be our Righteousness.

What Jeremiah prophesied in the Old Testament was fulfilled in the New Testament. Jesus is the righteous Branch descended from David. He came to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus was born under the law of God, so that he could fulfill the law of God. Jesus was tempted in every way, just as are, yet he was without sin. Jesus was in every way righteous, perfect, holy, without sin. Jesus is the revealer of the gospel, the Good News: The righteousness that God *demand*s from us in the Law is the righteousness that God *gives* to us in Christ. The Apostle Paul explained the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy in Romans 1: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. . . For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Romans 1:16,17). Paul goes on to say, “Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in [God’s] sight by

observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law has been made known. . . This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are [declared righteous] freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:20-24). I’ll say it again: The righteousness that God *demand*s from us in the Law is the righteousness that God *gives* to us in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So how does the Lord Our Righteousness that Jeremiah promised—how does he work for us? Jeremiah’s prophecy was fulfilled when God gave his own eternal Son to take upon himself our human flesh. He was born under the law, subject to all the same righteous requirements of the law that you and I are subject to. He kept the law for us; he became our righteous substitute under the law. Then God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, the perfect Lamb of God, who was offered up on the cross. His blood was innocent blood, untainted by any sin. It was the blood of God himself, the eternal blood of the covenant, that was spilled as righteous payment for the sin of the world. Our sins were laid on Jesus, and he carried them all away. But this is a really important point: When Jesus died on the cross he didn’t just take away something; he also *gave* us something. He took away our sins and gave us his righteousness. He gives us his own perfect obedience and calls it ours. When Jesus died on the cross and rose again he didn’t just take away our sins and give us a zero balance. No, he gave us an enormous credit to our account: All the righteousness of God himself attributed to us or “imputed” to us in Christ! He is the Lord Our Righteousness!

So how does all this perfect righteousness, the righteousness of the Lord himself that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law become ours? It’s very simple. The Lord himself prepares our hearts to receive him by working in us something called repentance. Repentance is a change of heart, a change of mind, a new way of looking at things. It’s a perspective the God’s own Spirit works in us. He causes us to look at ourselves as sinful and unworthy, he makes us sorry for our sins, he causes us to despair of our own righteousness, so that we don’t trust in our own merit or our own efforts to please God, and he causes us to see Jesus as our Righteousness. He dresses us up in Christ, with beautiful garments of righteousness. Scripture says, “All of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

This season of Advent is a season of preparation. Get ready, Jesus is coming! We prepare our hearts for his coming at Christmas, as we look forward to welcoming the baby Jesus, the Lord Our Righteousness, into humble, penitent hearts. And we prepare our hearts for his second coming, when he will come again soon at the end of time to judge the living and the dead and to take his people home with him to heaven. So the question is this: when you get to the front of the line on Judgment Day, what kind of righteousness do you want to be offer God? There is our own righteousness, the kind that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law held onto, but Scripture says, “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). Or there is the righteousness that God himself gives us in Christ. I can tell you which one will get you into heaven: Jesus, your blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress. Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head (Christian Worship, hymn 376).

On this first Sunday in Advent we ask Jesus to renew his presence in our hearts. With repentant hearts we’re sorry for the ways we have grieved our Savior. In humility we ask Jesus again to come and take control of our lives, to rule our lives, so that every day we love him, live for him, and thank him for forgiving our sins and declaring us righteous in God’s sight. We fix our eyes on Jesus and wait for his return, so that whenever he comes we stand repentant and ready to meet him, the Lord Our Righteousness. Amen.