6th Sunday after Trinity
Bessemer - 1958

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 5: 20 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.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT EXCELS

What would you think if someone were to come to you and say that the Christianity of your pastor was meaningless and superficial, that he was a hypocrite, that the officers of your church were likewise hypocrites, that the professors in your colleges and seminaries were hypocrites, that the officials of your church body were hypocrites? Undoubtedly, you would be taken back with surprise and shock! Well, according to the words of our Gospel lesson for today that is just about what Jesus did to the people of His day. He said, Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. These were hard, biting words, and it is perhaps not possible for us to realize how profoundly they effected the people who heard them. They looked to the Scribes and Pharisees as the ultimate in religious living. They judged them by what they saw on the outside. They did not know what was going on within their hearts.

But Jesus was not deceived by their external behavior and the formalism of their religious life. He looked right into the depths of their souls; and He knew how insincere they were at heart and how hypocritical they were in the fulfillment of religious observances. Their lives were marked by all kinds of regulations and external conformities. They added numerous amendments to the Law of Moses so that others might see just how religious they were. They professed to be sons of God; they went through many religious formalities; they fasted; they paid their tithes; they made long prayers; But it was all a sham; it was not genuine; their hearts were far from God. Because they did not actually kill a man they thought they had kept God's Law of Love; but that the hatred which was in their hearts made them the enemies of God and murderers in His sight, they did not realize. So Jesus with one sweeping sentence cuts through all their superficiality and declares: Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

These words teach us a lesson which we need to learn so very much in ou day. Ours is an age of religious pretense. People are very careful that they pu on their best face and behavior when they step into the House of the Lord for wor ship on Sunday. They go through all the outward forms and ceremonies with dignity and solemnity. They endeavor to act as pious as they possibly can. They are car ful to bow their heads at the appointed times; their lips mouth the Our Father; their voices sing the hymns of adoration and praise. They are very careful also that as they make their way home again after services all of their friends and acquaintances see them and know that they have been to church. Now all this is good and well, IF -- IF it is done in sincerity and truth. But I fear that far too often and with far too many Christianity is nothing more than a series of outward performances and acts. If we could focus a candid camera on the hearts of al those who claim Christ to be their Lord and Master and watch them as they go about their business for just one week, I am sure that we would be appalled and shocked by the inconsistencies and utter hypocrisy in a great majority of them.

The story is told of a young man who came into a telegraph office. He wanted to send a telegram to his mother asking her to send him some funds. Since he had no money to pay for the telegram he asked that it be sent collect. The manager of the telegraph office, however, took some money out of his pocket and put it into the till to pay for the telegram. A short time later the young man returned. This time he had a gun in his hand and demanded that the manager of the telegraph office turn over whatever money he had. The manager looked at the lad, told him to put his gun down and help himself. Then the young man put his gun away and said: I did not come here to get money. I only came to find out whether you were really sincere, whether you were truly as good as you presumed to be and seemed to be when you paid for the telegram which I sent to my mother.

That was rather a unique way of testing a man's sincerity, but it does point out a genuine concern for getting underneath the superficial coating that covers so much in our lives. I am sure that all of us can mention any number of things which we have done - not because we have had our whole heart in it - but

because we wanted to leave a favorable impression on those around us. This is particularly true in the realm of Christianity. No doubt there are many who have come to church this morning - not because they were bubbling over with an enthusiasm for giving God all the honor and praise and adoration due His Name; actually they would have rather stayed at home - but because they wanted to give others the impression that they are Christian. But such insincerity shows itself again and again by the lives we live. So often when outsiders are confronted with the Godpel and encouraged to join the church, they will reply: Why should I go to church? Look at Mr. So and So. He's supposed to be a good member of your church, but look how he conducts his business, look how he lives. Why, he can curse and swear with the best of them. If that's Christianity I don't want any part of it. I believe I can be just as good a Christian in not going to church as I could be if I went to church and were as insincere about it as so many people in the church seem to be The word of Jesus cuts such pretense off at the roots: Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Christianity must be more than a mouthing of phrases. It must be more than the compliance with outward formalities. Christianity must be something that goes down deep in your heart, that fills your soul, that permeates your whole life and determines what you do and what you will not do. It is not enough that we babble the words: I am a sinner! We must say it with a feeling of shame, with a consciousness of guilt, with a humility that is sincere. It is not enough that we merely confess our sins with out lips. We must stand before God with hearts that are broken and heads that are bowed as we plead with Him for mercy and forgiveness.

Likewise, our loyalty to Christ must be real. It is not enough merely to recite the words of the second article of the Apostles' Creed. We are not done when we say, I believe in Jesus Christ. Christ must fill and flood our hearts. As our Savior He has endured unspeakable suffering and pain for our sins. He did this even though we far from deserved such mercy. Our hearts then must necessar-

ily be moved by the depth of His amazing love and compassion. We would not willing ly want to do anything to offend this precious Redeemer. He is the one and only foundation for all the hope which we have in this life and in that which is to come

And so the sincerity of our faith in Jesus will express itself in real love to our fellowmen. It is not enough to say Thou shalt not kill and then never actually lift a hand against a person to take his life. Our hearts must likewise be free from hatred, from spite, from envy, from the spirit of vengeance, and filled with the spirit of love. This love must express itself not just to a few, but to all men. Whether or not we will attract others to the glories of the Gospel and by our lives move them to join us in glorifying our Father which is in heaven will be decided by the sincerity or the insincerity of the love which we profess to have in our hearts. Christianity must be lived. As Christians our responsibility is to introduce into the world the spirit of Christianity. Christ loved all; He died for all. It is our task to spread that love.

We must, then, be sincere in our repentance, in our faith and in the expression of love for our fellowmen; for if we are not sincere, we ourselves will fail in obtaining the blessings of Christianity and at the same time will become the greatest real hindrance toward keeping others from coming into the kingdom of Christ. It does not matter how costly and how precious we may think our gifts are. The Lord wants neither us nor our gifts unless we come to Him with a sincere faith and a spirit of Christian love in our hearts. If we come in any other way He says, Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

May God move us by His abounding love so to be so that our righteousness might exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, that we might be truly believing Christians who sincerely and gratefully accept Jesus and express our faith in pious living. Amen.