“I tell you, unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of God.”

Jesus’ teachings were not all sweetness and light; they were not all fervorinos meant to raise people’s spirits. Many times Jesus confronted people with some rather hard truths. Today’s gospel reading is an example.

What does he mean by surpassing the holiness of the scribes and Pharisees? What kind of holiness did they have? The scribes had a holiness that was a matter of copying everything they had been given, as if being holy was a matter of handing on everything they had received exactly as they had received it without mixing with it. A good scribe never added or subtracted one little thing from what he was given--word for word, letter after letter. An exact copy had to be made of what had gone before. And this represents a mentality, a way of thinking about religion and law--and even God. It’s utterly and totally static! And it is totally and utterly uninvolved! That is a kind of spirituality, a kind of holiness, people can have--even if they don’t write! They just say and they just do exactly what they were told, and they never think about it. They don’t mix with it; they don’t give it their own emphasis. Their own personal response is not there. That’s the holiness of the scribes.

What’s the holiness of the Pharisees? Well, of course, the Pharisees were actually very devout people. They were very devout; this we must never forget. The word itself is a Greek word that comes from a Hebrew word, “Hasidim,” that really means “beloved.” So they were very interested in devotion to God. They were devout people. But their means of devotion were strictly limited to following the law. Again, like the scribes, exactly what it said--they knew exactly what the law said. They didn’t know what the law meant, nor did they ever try to find out. And the reason they didn’t know what the law meant is they didn’t know the lawgiver.
This is what Jesus constantly emphasized: knowing the Father! He came to show us the way to the Father. This is a different kind of knowledge from knowing letters and words and sentences--knowing the Father personally. And Jesus said, “Unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, unless it becomes a personal kind of holiness where you actually know the Father, where you commit yourself to finding meaning in the law, where you take a stand on what it really is supposed to do for yourself and for others, you’ll never enter the kingdom of God.” That’s not really a threat. It’s not as if the kingdom of God is some sort of reward for doing something else. He’s saying, “You’re not on the right road to the kingdom of God.” The road is personal knowledge of the Father. It is seeking meaning in the law and in the traditions. It is figuring out and mixing with everything that we have been given so it becomes part of us, and we make a contribution to it. That is the way to the kingdom. And if you’re not on the right road to the kingdom, you’ll never get there! And this is an idea that Jesus constantly stressed, and the early Fathers of the Church did as well: that we are on the way. In fact, the word for “parish” in Greek, “paroikia,” is really the word for “people on the march.” The original idea of a parish was a people on the march--not physically--on the march spiritually, psychologically, mentally, to another place in themselves, namely, the kingdom of God!

And along the way, one of the great obstacles people have to deal with is the need for vengeance, the need for retribution. So he brings up the next part--which we can’t go into today. But that’s getting into the heart of the matter: how we really feel and think about people even though we may never talk to them. That’s all part of a way to the kingdom. It isn’t just not murdering people physically, criminally, in the outer world; it’s not murdering them in our thoughts either, in the way we feel toward them, and on and on. And we have to learn this lesson because ultimately we are our own jail keepers. For this reason he ends this by saying, “I warn you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny,” because you’ll be the one keeping yourself there.