

FEBRUARY 15, 2026 FATHER BRANDEN GORDON

At over 14,000 kilometres away, the city of Perth, Australia, is the farthest major city on earth from Toronto. A non-stop flight from Toronto to Perth would take about 20 hours. If it were possible for you to drive your car in a straight line across the Pacific Ocean, it would take about a week to get to Perth with absolutely no breaks.

The distance between Toronto and Perth is very great, but this morning I would like to talk to you about a distance that is even greater than that. What I'm referring to is the distance between the mind and the heart, between knowing things intellectually and actually allowing those truths to penetrate into the depths of your hearts.

"I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." These words from today's Gospel are extremely challenging to all of us.

Who among us can say that we take our faith as seriously as the scribes and Pharisees took theirs? Just consider the scribes. They dedicated their whole lives to studying, interpreting, and copying by hand the Hebrew Scriptures. An experienced scribe would have had huge swaths of Scripture memorized.

How many of us can say in all honesty that we know the Bible as well as the scribes knew the Bible? I don't know about you, but it sounds difficult to surpass the righteousness of a scribe.

Then there are the Pharisees. They have a bad reputation among us Christians, of course, because they were constantly arguing with Jesus in the Gospels. But besides their hostility to Jesus, we have to admit that there's much to be admired in the Pharisee.

These were men who made it their life's mission to follow God's law down to the smallest detail. And when I say "God's law," I don't just mean the Ten Commandments. No, the Pharisees took the Ten Commandments and expanded on each one of them, creating many sub-commandments.

The Pharisees had a total of 613 laws to live by, and they took each and every one of them very seriously.

So how can Jesus expect our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? Wouldn't it be difficult enough even to match their level of righteousness, much less surpass it?

Well, you see, on a surface level, the scribes and Pharisees appear to be very righteous and devout. But their debates with Jesus reveal the spiritual fault line which lay just beneath the surface.

Theirs was a righteousness that remained primarily on the level of intellectual assent and external acts. In other words, their righteousness hadn't spanned the vast distance between the mind and the heart.

Sure, the scribes and Pharisees studied and followed God's law, but they hadn't allowed it to penetrate into the depths of their hearts. They hadn't internalized the law.

For the scribes and Pharisees, it was enough that a person merely refrained from committing heinous acts like murder and adultery. For Jesus, however, merely refraining from these and other grave sins isn't sufficient evidence that a person is truly righteous.

For Jesus, righteousness consists in internalizing God's law to such an extent that one doesn't even give in to those passions which lie at the root of sin—passions like pride, lust, greed, and excessive anger.

And so Jesus is teaching us that righteousness is more than just giving intellectual assent to doctrine, and it's more than just following moral laws. Doing these two things is enough to make us appear righteous, but it's not enough to make us actually righteous.

True righteousness comes from a personal and intimate relationship with God.