

Self-Righteousness

‘Brethren, with all my hearts desire for Israel, I pray to God they may be saved. I testify they have a zeal for God, but it is not according to knowledge, for being ignorant of the righteousness of God and seeking to establish a righteousness of their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness, for Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law as a means of righteousness for everyone who believes in Him’ (Romans 10:1 to 4).

These verses tell us, Jesus is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes. Jesus was not the end of the Law as part of the Word of God, or as part of Israel’s history, or as part of Israel’s culture – Jesus was the end of the Law as a means of righteousness to those who believe in Jesus as their Messiah. We can no longer use the Laws of Moses as a way of attaining righteousness with God. There is no exception – for both Jew and Gentile, Jesus brought about the end of the Law of Moses as a means to achieving righteousness with God. It is impossible for us to be righteous without a relationship with the Lord. If we try to be righteous without Him, we are being self-righteous and that is sin. We need to depend on God to make us righteous. The above verse says they tried to establish a righteousness of their own. Other scriptures say people did what was right in their own eyes. Even Job had a problem with self-righteousness. ‘The three men ceased to answer Job because he was righteous in his own eyes’ (Job 32:1).

Self-righteousness is also spiritual blindness. We cannot be smugly sure of our own righteousness, because it is impossible for us to establish our own righteousness. We must submit ourselves to the righteousness of God. Seeking to establish a righteousness of our own is the Biblical name for self-righteousness. ‘We (mankind) are all an unclean thing. All our righteousness are as filthy rags’ (Isaiah 64:6). The best we as a fallen race can achieve as righteousness is dirtiness. We need the righteousness of God to be righteous people. The ‘filthy rags’ Isaiah was comparing our righteousness to, were the rags used to wash a corpse. Those rags were so filthy they were only fit to be burned. That is what God thinks of self-righteousness.

For an example of self-righteousness, we can look at the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. ‘Jesus told this parable to some people who were convinced of their own righteousness, and despised all others. Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee began to pray thus to himself, “God, I thank You I am not like the rest of men – extortioners, unrighteous, adulterers – or even like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I gain.” But the tax collector, standing at a distance would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but kept striking his chest saying, “O God, be merciful to me, the sinner I am!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified and forgiven, rather than the Pharisee, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted’ (Luke 18:9 to 14).

God’s righteousness works in us by faith. Part of the nature of sin is pride and self-righteousness. It is within the sin nature of man to want to be independent of God. One way mankind seeks to be independent of God, is through religion. The above parable shows us the vast difference between having ‘religion’ compared to having a close, intimate and humbling relationship with God the Father through accepting the blood of Jesus. God’s righteousness differs in each one of these following five distinctive features of the Pharisee’s self-righteousness we are to look out for.

Number one is self-centredness; thus he prayed to himself. People like that pray, but their prayers are not directed towards God because they are too wrapped up in themselves. Self-righteousness is being self-centred. God’s righteousness is centred on Jesus our Messiah. We must take our eyes off ourselves and keep them on the Lord. ‘Look to Me all the ends of the earth and be saved for I am God and there is no one else’ (Isaiah 45:22).

Number two; the Pharisee despised others. Self-righteousness leads people to despise others and look to their faults, but the scriptures tell us to love others and accept others as Jesus has accepted us because that brings glory to God (Romans 15:7), plus we are all ‘Accepted in the beloved – that is accepted as part of the body of our Messiah’ (Ephesians 1:6). ‘Above all things be earnest in your love among yourselves, for love covers (ignores) a multitude of sins (and faults)’ (1 Peter 4:8). Accepting others as they are, is the opposite of despising them. God does not change us then accept us, He accepts us then works on changing us to be more like Him. We are all sinners so none of us has the right to despise another genuine Christian.

Number three; the standard of comparison is unscriptural. The Pharisee compared his level of righteousness with others. He was righteous in his own eyes. To compare or measure ourselves with others God says, is a lack of understanding (2 Corinthians 10:12). God has no other standard of righteousness but the standard Jesus set down for us to follow.

Number four; the Pharisee's set of rules did not allow for change or improvement. His rules were the beginning and end of his relationship with God. Self-righteous people are unable to grow or progress; they usually resist change because it makes them feel threatened. God's righteousness is progressive and it grows as we grow in God (Ephesians 4:15). We are slowly being transformed into His image from glory to glory. This comes from the Lord, Who is the (Holy) Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, shining brighter until it reaches its full strength in the perfect day (Proverbs 4:18).

Number five; the Pharisee had his list of his own rules he thought others should follow. When we confront people about their sin, without exception, they will give a list of the things they do not do, but will rarely admit to sins they do commit. Many Christians today have their own set of rules just like the Pharisees did 2,000 years ago. There are people who can sometimes be spiritually blind, caused by self-righteousness; people from a 'holiness' background; from a religious background. An accurate description of holiness teaching is this, 'Do not handle this. Do not taste that. Do not touch them ... to do this is to follow human precepts and doctrines' (Colossians 2:21 & 22). Our righteousness does not consist in keeping rules. Rules often become outdated or change according to the culture of the country in which we live. We need to have common sense in that matter. Certainly we must submit ourselves to God and be holy for He is holy (1 Peter 1:16), and we need to walk in obedience, holiness and righteousness so we can make it through the 'narrow gate' Jesus taught us about (Matthew 7:13 & 14), we should not encourage anything that is not loving or that may cause a person to sin. We need to follow the scriptural principles laid down for us to follow – not by legalism – but by love and wisdom.

Many churches have unnecessary legalistic rules. Rules for written church membership (which is not scriptural), rules for baptism, rules for church activities, rules for attending meetings, and if you are not doing 'things' then you are guilty. For a person to do too much activity is probably neglecting their home and the responsibilities that are there. Our righteousness is not obeying rules – our righteousness should be based on faith. 'For what do the scriptures say? Abraham believed in God and it was credited to him as righteousness ... To one who believes in Him Who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited to him as righteousness' (Romans 4:3 & 5). It is faith that makes us righteous, not activities and rules. To receive righteousness by faith, the first thing we must do is stop trying to work out our own righteousness. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves righteous. Some fundamentalists are very insecure, especially if someone challenges their doctrines, then they become defensive. That is because they are basing their righteousness on rules and doctrines instead of on the Rock (Jesus) Who is also the Word of God (Revelation 19:13).

Some people follow 'Spiritual' rules. They know the scriptures by rote – but not by heart because there is not a lot of deep understanding, just the quote. These people know a scripture for every situation, but their knowledge of God is minimal and their relationship with Him not based on faith. Knowing the scriptures well does not make us righteous. There are the 'cleaners' rules. They think being righteous is having their kitchens or their cars spotless. Being tidy does not make us righteous, and we must never despise others who are less tidy. People who trust in themselves and their rules almost always despise those who do not keep to their rules. If we become superior in our attitude to others, then the Lord may deal with our pride. The Bible does not say pride goes before a fall, it says pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall (Proverbs 16:18). A haughty person is one who looks down on other people – a self-righteous person.

We cannot base our righteousness on legalism. That is making legalism the way to righteousness, but Jesus brought an end to the Law as a means of righteousness. Legalism causes people to lose sight of the real purpose for which the law was given. The Law of Moses was given so we would understand what sin is and to reveal what God expected of mankind. 'For the real function of the Law is to make men conscious of sin' (Romans 3:20; 7:7). 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. This is the first and most important commandment, and the second is like it; you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself. These two commandments sum up all the Law and the Prophets' (Matthew 22:37 to 40). This is the whole law – love God, then love your neighbour. If we love God and our neighbour, then we will not sin against them. Any interpretation of the Law that does not produce love, is a mis-interpretation. Many people who are occupied by religious laws are usually the most self-righteous and the least loving. For example, if we look at a religion that excommunicates others just because they do not fit into their religious doctrines, is a religion void of love. They pick and choose whom they will love, but that is wickedness. The purpose of the Law is love, and we must love all our fellow believers, regardless of which building they choose to worship in, and in spite of their individual beliefs. 'The purpose of our instruction is love from a pure heart, a clear conscience and sincere faith, but some have sinned on this very matter ...' (1 Timothy 1:5 & 6). The goal of our instruction is love and if it does not produce love, it is a waste of time.

Another example of legalism is the way the Pharisee's regarded the Sabbath day. The purpose of the Sabbath was so God's people, their animals, the servants and the visitors could rest and be refreshed (Exodus 23:12). The Sabbath was made for the benefit of man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). The Pharisees had turned that upside down and made the Sabbath a law. That is typical of legalism. It turns a blessing into a burden. The Sabbath was a point of legalism in Jesus' day. Jesus healed many people on the Sabbath because that was the day set aside for rest and refreshing. The Pharisees had made the Sabbath Day a law to accomplish exactly the opposite to what God gave the Sabbath for in the first place. Jesus wonderfully healed a woman on a Sabbath day after eighteen years of serious infirmity, but the legalistic ruler of the synagogue was filled with indignation. Indignation is an effect of self-righteous legalism. Jesus called him a hypocrite. Jesus was indicating that was the very reason for the Sabbath – to set people free from their burdens. When Jesus said those things to the ruler of the synagogue, His adversaries were ashamed and the people rejoiced (Luke 13:10 to 17).

The legalism, self-righteousness and hypocrisy in Jesus' day can be compared to some church leaders today. These religious leaders were actually keeping people out of the Kingdom of God. They pretended to pray, they led young people astray making them children of hell, plus they committed many other sins. What did Jesus say to the religious leaders? 'Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be honoured. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... Woe to you, blind guides ... You blind fools! ... You blind men! ... You blind Pharisee ... You serpents! You spawn of vipers! How can you escape the Judgement in the lake of fire? (Matthew 23:12 to 33). Jesus certainly did not hold back did He? He really let them have it! But the key word here is 'blind'. Self-righteousness produces spiritual blindness.

To avoid self-righteousness we need to humble ourselves or the Lord will humble us. We are not to be wise in our own conceit (Romans 12:16). Jesus is our standard to follow, and He humbled Himself to death on the cross (Philippians 2:8). God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). We must humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord and under the mighty hand of God, and in due time He will exalt us (James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6). If we want to be great in God's Kingdom, we must learn to be humble enough to serve one another (Mark 9:35). We need to live lives worthy of God, Who calls us into His own Kingdom, so self-righteousness has no place in the Kingdom of God (1 Thessalonians 2:12). 'For this we were called because Jesus suffered for us, leaving us an example so we should follow in His footsteps. He did not sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was cursed He did not curse back. When He suffered He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. He bore our sins in His body on the cross so we, having died to sin, might live to righteousness. By Whose stripes we were healed. We were going astray like sheep but now have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls' (1 Peter 2:21 to 25).

Amen and God bless you.

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