

Self-Righteousness

'Brethren, with all my hearts desire for Israel, I long and pray to God that they may be saved. I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not according to knowledge, for being ignorant of the righteousness that God ascribes, and seeking to establish a righteousness of their own, they did not submit themselves to God's righteousness; for Jesus is the end of the Law as a means of righteousness for everyone who trusts in Him' (Romans 10:1 to 4).

These verses tell us, Jesus is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes. Paul did not say Jesus was 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. Amen.

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 their own, as in the above verse, is the Biblical name for self-righteousness. 'But 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 considered 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 trusted in themselves and were confident that they were righteous, and scorned all the rest of men: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee took his stand ostentatiously and began to pray thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like the rest of men – extortioners, swindlers, 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 wicked sinner that 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).

There are five distinctive features of the Pharisee's self-righteousness to look out for: Self-centredness, despising others, comparing oneself with others, lack of spiritual growth and unnecessary legalistic rules. God's righteousness works in us. 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. God's righteousness differs in each one of these following points.

Number one is self-centredness; thus he prayed with himself. People like that pray, but their prayers are not directed towards God; they are too wrapped up in themselves. Self-righteousness is 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 us to despise others, 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). Accepting is the opposite of despising others, and we need to accept weaker believers and not criticise them ... 'Let not him who eats (meat) look down on or despise him who abstains ... for God has accepted him (Romans 14:1 to 3). God does not change us then receive us, He receives us then works on changing us to be more like Him.

Number three; the standard of comparison is unscriptural. The Pharisee compared himself with others, which is something God never does. Self-righteousness compares itself with others and does not use God's standard. God has only one standard for righteousness and that is Jesus Himself. God will not accept other standards. To compare ourselves by others, God says is not wise, or is foolish (2 Corinthians 10:12). 'Because God has appointed a day when He will judge the world righteously' (Acts 17:31). That scripture says righteously, not by religion, or by doctrine, or by denomination, or by action, but righteously. God is going to judge the world by the standard set by Jesus. God has no other standard. Paul rejected any other standard of righteousness but that of Jesus. Even Paul himself said he persecuted the church by the Law's standard of righteousness, but he did not achieve righteousness that could be called his own (Philippians 3:7 to 14).

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 threatens them. God's righteousness is progressive, it grows and never stands still (Ephesians 4:15). We are constantly being transformed into His image in ever increasing splendour from one degree of glory to another. 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 that shines more and more 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), we should not encourage anything that is not loving or that may cause a person to sin. We certainly 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 activities – they must go door to door; rules for attending meetings; and if you're not doing 'things' then you're 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 does the scriptures say? Abraham believed in God and it was credited to him as righteousness. But to one who believes in Him Who justifies the unGodly, his faith is credited to him as righteousness' (Romans 4:3 & 5). Do you see? 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 righteousness. 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 Who is also the Word.

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 righteousness. Then 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 the law an end in itself and thus losing sight of the real purpose for which the law was given. A legalist becomes trapped in his own rules and loses the vision of why it was given in the first place. The Law of Moses was given so we would understand what sin is. 'For the real function of the Law is to make men conscious of sin' (Romans 3:20). 'Love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your 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 don't 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 object and purpose of our instruction is love which springs from a pure heart, a clear conscience and sincere faith; but certain individuals 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 twisted the Sabbath to accomplish exactly the opposite to what God gave the Sabbath for in the first place. Jesus healed a woman on a Sabbath day; she was wonderfully healed after 18 years of serious infirmity, but the legalistic ruler of the synagogue was filled with indignation (Luke 13:10 to 14). Indignation is an effect of self-righteous legalism. Then 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, Jesus' adversaries were ashamed and the people rejoiced (Luke 13:17).

Here is another example of legalism, self-righteousness and hypocrisy in Jesus' day which can be compared to some church leaders today. These religious leaders were actually keeping people out of the Kingdom of God; pretended to pray; 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 shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself, shall be raised to honour. But woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites... Woe to you, blind guides ... You blind fools! ... You blind men! ... Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... You blind guides ... Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... You blind Pharisee ... Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... You serpents! You spawn of vipers! How can you escape the penalty to be suffered in hell? (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 (Matthew 23:12). 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). Remember; God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). We are to humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will exalt us (James 4:10). We must humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and in due time He will exalt us (1 Peter 5:6). If we want to truly be great in God's Kingdom, we must learn to be humble enough to serve one another (Mark 9:34 & 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).

Amen and God bless you.

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