

Different Kinds of Righteousness

The Bible recognizes two classes of righteousness. In his sermon on the mount, Christ said to his disciples, and to the multitude, “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.” Matt. 5:20. The Pharisees were the best people in the Jewish nation, and it may be said, in the world. That is, so far as outward acts were concerned. The name Pharisee signifies “separated;” and they took this name because they were separated from the common people by their superior goodness. They were full of zeal for the law, yet Jesus said to his hearers, and to us, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of Heaven.”

Some have erroneously concluded from these words that Jesus was finding fault with them for keeping the law so strictly, and that he would have us ignore it. But on the contrary, he says that our righteousness must exceed theirs. That is, it must go as far as theirs, and farther still. Then we must keep as much of the law as they did, and more. How can that be? Matt. 23:27, 28 explains: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” The Lord wants righteousness that comes from the heart. He did not object to having the scribes and Pharisees outwardly righteous; he would not have us openly break the law; but he wants outward service, and inward service, too.

These two degrees of righteousness are really two kinds of righteousness. These two kinds of righteousness are named by Paul in Phil. 3:8, 9: “Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”

In these words Paul recognizes his own righteousness as a righteousness entirely distinct from the righteousness which is of God by faith. The former was such righteousness as the scribes and Pharisees find; the latter is the kind which we must have,—a kind far exceeding that of the Pharisees,—if we would enter into the kingdom of Heaven.

On one occasion Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.” Matt. 21:31. How could it be that the publicans and harlots, the scum of the earth, could get to Heaven more readily than those strict Pharisees? One would naturally think, “Surely the publicans and harlots have a great deal more to do to get ready for Heaven, than the Pharisees have.” Luther has explained this matter in the following words:—

“Wherefore they that seek to be quickened and justified by the law, are much further off from righteousness and life than the publicans, sinners, and harlots. For they cannot trust to their own works, seeing they be such that they cannot hope to obtain grace and forgiveness thereby. For if righteousness done according to the law do not justify, how can sins justify, which are committed contrary to the law? Therefore in this case they are in far better ease than the justiciaries; for they have no affiance in their own works; which greatly hindereth true faith in Christ, if it do not utterly

take it away. Contrariwise, the justiciaries, which abstain outwardly from sins, and live holily and without blame in the sight of the world, cannot be without the opinion of their own righteousness, with which the true faith in Christ cannot stand. And for this cause they be more miserable than the publicans and harlots, who offer not their good works to God in his displeasure, that for the same he may recompense them with everlasting life, as the justiciaries do, for they have none to offer; but desire that their sins may be pardoned for Christ's sake."—Luther on Galatians, chap. 5.

Christ's statement in Matt. 21:31, is repeated by Paul, in other words, in Rom. 9:30, 31: "What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness." Then in answer to the question, "Wherefore?" he continues: "Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law." Verse 32. "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Rom. 10:3.

Now we have the whole thing before us. The Jews followed the law, and so far as anybody could see, they kept it strictly. Then they trusted to their own works, and did not submit to the righteousness of God. But the Gentiles, and the publicans and harlots, had no good works to trust in, and therefore they willingly accepted the righteousness which is of God by faith. Thus the publicans and harlots receive the blessing of God more readily than the Pharisees.

But why is it that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees could not count for something? and why could they not be counted as nearer the kingdom of God than those who were openly vicious? For the reason given in Rom. 14:23: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." How can this be? Just this way: Simple outward righteousness is as much righteousness as any man can attain by himself; but this is so far below the righteousness that God requires that it is indeed sin. It isn't real righteousness at all. Thus Isaiah says: "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." Isa. 64:6. Anyone who has any just conception of God, must acknowledge the truth of this. Whose righteousness can bear any comparison to the righteousness of God? Compared with the spotlessness of his character, the righteousness of the best of men (that is, their own natural or acquired righteousness), must be acknowledged to be but filthy rags.

Then what will be the condition of the man who looks at his own good works with complacency, and who thinks to atone for his short-comings by his own good deeds? He is simply trying to cover one filthy, ragged garment by putting on some more filthy rags. Instead of making himself better, he is in a worse plight.

To like import Paul says: "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith." Gal. 3:10–11. That is, a curse is pronounced upon all who do not keep the whole law. But "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and moreover, no man is able of himself to keep the law, no matter how hard he may try. Gal. 5:17. Therefore, all who trust in their own works, are necessarily under the curse of the law.

How foolish then for one sinner to compare himself with another; for one to think that he has not so great a work to do to be saved, as some other one has, because he has not lived so wicked a life

as that other one has! Both have been wicked, although perhaps not to the same degree; and therefore both need the cleansing blood of Christ. They cannot be saved without Christ “for there is none other name under Heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Acts 4:12. There is nothing but the blood of Jesus that can wash away sin. Therefore sinners, both great and small, must all do the same thing; they must go to Christ for cleansing. There is just as much for one to do as for another. And since the love of God in Christ is infinite, it is just as easy for him to cleanse the vilest sinner as the most scrupulous Pharisee.

And when the sinner has been justified by faith, what then? Then “the just shall live by faith.” “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.” 1 John 5:4. “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth.” Rom. 10:4. Then the one who has the most faith, will live the most upright life. Of course, for human righteousness is of no more worth after a man is justified than it was before. Says Christ, “Without me ye can do nothing.”

“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.” Rom. 12:3. How highly ought a man to think of himself? Just as much as upright Job did after he had seen the righteousness of God. Said he, “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” Job. 42:6. Then how much have we to do, to prepare to meet Christ in peace? We have to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, and to exercise much faith,—the real faith that works by love. Then will Christ be made unto us “wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption.” “And this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

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