

The Wednesday Word, Dec. 3, 2008: The Gospel and the Self-Righteous, Part 1

An old Anglican Bishop once remarked, “Everywhere the Apostle Paul went they had a riot, everywhere I go they make cups of tea.” I would suggest that if the gospel is preached correctly the preacher may very well get fewer cups of tea, for if preached correctly, the gospel will annoy and anger a certain group of church people.... the self- righteous.

Each of us needs to guard against becoming self-righteous and it is only by the gospel that we can be preserved from such a fate. So, what do I mean by ‘self-righteous’? There are three varieties of self-righteous people we want to consider in today’s Wednesday Word.

1) The “Not sure that I’m really a sinner” Self-Righteous Sinner.

The most easily distinguished group of self-righteous generally subscribe to the theory that they are indeed sinners, but quietly they are not really sure that they have their facts straight on this point.

The adherent to this class of self-righteousness is the person who, for the most part, is a religious individual who says their prayers, believes in right and wrong, is convinced they are as good as most people and, if the truth be known, perhaps a good deal better. All this business about people getting saved is a little irritating and to be told that they are a sinner whose only hope is an alien righteousness which belongs to and is found in someone else is, to say the least, somewhat irksome. These people have not yet discovered their complete wreck, ruin and spiritual insolvency. They know nothing of their personal depravity, guilt, and consequent danger.

I remember once preaching a series on, “Righteousness in Christ Jesus Alone”. I had just recently taken over as the Pastor at this particular church and had thought that, as the church was “Bible Believing”, these messages would be an exercise in strengthening the saints in the faith. How wrong I was! After a number of weeks there was an uproar and revolt among many of the leading ‘saints’. How dare I say that we were all sinners! How dare I judge them? Some of them left the church saying I had condemned and insulted them. Others stayed in and tried to convert me to having a more presentable message.

One of the horrors of sin is that it can take the message of the love and kindness of God towards us in Christ Jesus and treat it as a personal insult. Imagine the doctor diagnosing a terminal disease and the patient feeling affronted when he is told of his condition and being even more offended when he is told he cannot possibly cure himself and that his only hope lies outside of himself in the work to be performed by another.

2) The ‘Trying Harder’ Self –Righteous Sinner

But back to my story! Eventually, as the gospel was expounded week after week, God began to slowly change hearts. Some of my antagonists began to discover that their hearts were indeed evil, sinful and deceitful; The Lord began to graciously show them that, in themselves, there was nothing to commend them to Him.

But the human heart is a remarkable thing. Even after having been touched by grace it continues to harbor opposition to God. It is a wonderful thing to behold how self-righteous people will do their best to preserve their self-righteousness as long as they are able. Some of my one-time opponents began to come to me saying things such as, “We accept we are not saved by our righteousness, but we are still going to try the best we can to get into Heaven”. To rest in Christ alone seemed foolish and perhaps even dangerous to them. They still looked for something within themselves to recommend them to God. They were like the old Irish farmer who wore suspenders and a belt on his trousers just ‘to be sure to be sure!’

The gospel of course exposes the sheer folly of self-righteousness: if our righteousness can save us then we don’t need Christ’s. Conversely, if Christ’s righteousness alone can save, it is aggravated foolishness for us to attempt to contribute our righteousness to the equation. So I continued to reason with them that to trust in ourselves or in any religious ceremony, as a means to make us safer than we already are in Christ Jesus, is madness. Did we expect to be accepted in Heaven, I reasoned, because of something we had done? If that was the case, then Christ Jesus was the biggest time waster in history. Look at Him there, hanging on the cross, suffering the torments of wrath and sin. What was He thinking about? Did He not know that we could save ourselves by being good church people?

Bit by bit as Christ was continually shown to be our ONLY hope, these dear church folk began to see that there really is nothing we can bring to God to commend us but the doing and dying of Jesus Christ. They slowly began to see that the salvation of God does not stand on human works; rather it stands on the sacrificial and substitutionary death of Jesus.

By the way, anyone preaching the gospel will insult self-righteous people because there is an inbuilt offense in the cross. There should, therefore, be no surprise when un-saved, self-satisfied members of your family attack and reject you for your faith in Christ. The worst thing you can hear from them is for them to say, “Oh that’s nice that you believe in Jesus, whatever keeps you happy.”

3) The ‘Trusting in Repentance’, Self-Righteous Sinner

But self-righteousness is not always as obvious as the types I encountered in the group in that church. Sometimes it is much more subtle and hidden. This is one of the reasons why the gospel needs to continually be preached to the saints. I’ve also discovered there’s another group of self-righteous saints who are a lot harder to spot. Here’s the way they think. They say,

“We cannot boast of anything, we confess we are sinners; Lord we thank you that you have put away our sin because we have confessed it and have repented of it.”

This is a much more dangerous group to belong to than either of the first two. They seem closer to the truth, but look closely at what they are saying. They are still fatally flawed in their thinking for they are continuing to hold on to something other than Christ alone. They are looking for forgiveness based upon their repentance! What an imperfect and faulty foundation they have built for themselves.

What I am saying may seem odd to you, but, if it does, let me ask, do you for one moment think or imagine that your repentance is perfect? What about, for example, the sins you have forgotten? They have been somehow deleted from your memory card, but they are still there! You haven't yet repented of them because you can't remember them. And what about the sins you committed that you didn't even know were sins! You need to repent of those things, but how can you since you didn't know they were sins?

Although repentance is a vital truth, it is a foundation of quick sand. The only foundation that will hold in the Day of Judgment is the solid rock of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

“When he shall come with trumpet sound;
Oh May I then in Him be found;
Dressed in His righteousness alone;
Faultless to stand before the throne.
On Christ the solid rock I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.”

To trust in a foundation of repentance is to be no better off than a good Muslim. Many Muslims believe that it is necessary to repent and, if they repent, Allah accepts them. But the gospel teaches us no one is ever accepted because they repent. Although true saving faith and repentance are inseparable, we are accepted only because a sinless man, Jesus Christ, lived for us, died for us and rose again for us. And yes of course the kindness of God leads us to repentance, but our repentance is not something we should trust as our ground of acceptance before God. Our repentance is, at best, very flawed. As the great preacher John Berridge used to say,

“My repentance needs to be repented of, my tears need washing, and the very washing of my tears needs still to be washed over again with the blood of my Redeemer.”

It is very hard for the self-righteous to let go of anything and everything he can point to within himself as his trust and hope. If the truth be known, it is very easy for any of us to slip away from the gospel and almost unknowingly trust something we have done as the ground of Salvation. But the Bible knows nothing of self-salvation. Spurgeon says,

“There is no comfort in the Bible for those who would save themselves. There are plenty of good words for sinners, and for those that are righteous in Christ; but for your ‘good’ people, not a word of comfort.”

The truth is this; Hell is full of ‘good’ people! They were so ‘good’ that they somehow became satisfied with a righteousness, which was totally inadequate for Heaven. It is only in Christ alone and His accomplishments on our behalf that we can rest. Only in Christ can the required perfect and flawless righteousness be found. Let's stay honest before God. Let's abandon all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and cast ourselves wholly upon Christ for our acceptance and right standing in heaven. Let's side with the following sentiment from the great hymn writer, William Cowper,

“My God, how perfect are thy ways!

But mine polluted are;
Sin twines itself about my praise,
And slides into my prayer.

When I would speak what thou hast done
To save me from my sin,
I cannot make thy mercies known
But self-applause creeps in.

This heart, a fountain of vile thoughts,

How does it overflow!
While self upon the surface floats,
Still bubbling from below.

Let others in the gaudy dress
Of fancied merit shine,
The Lord shall be my righteousness,
The Lord for ever mine. “

And that's the Gospel Truth