

Overcoming the righteous trap!

Breakthrough Christianity:

Luke 18:9-14

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If you've attended church all your life, you are in for a treat. The series of messages entitled *Breakthrough Christianity* will be so relevant to you. If you are just starting to get involved in Christianity and the church, you'll find it interesting; but this series is targeted at people who faithfully attend worship and are involved with the church. If that's you, you'll really find it challenging. However, it is my hope and conviction that you'll also find it freeing.

Sometimes pastors dump on church people. They get hurt and so their sermons get laced with anger and condemnation. The pastor thinks he's confronting and challenging the congregation with truth, but instead his hidden hurt leaves his people going away each Sunday with a sense of unresolved guilt. I think of what Solomon wrote:

People may be pure in their own eyes, but the LORD examines their motives.
(Proverbs 16:2, NLT)

That's true of us preachers too. Some of our motives escape our understanding. Like everyone else I've experienced hurt, and my motives can be hidden from me. However, I trust that I won't vent latent anger. I pray that no one will go away hurt, that everyone will be helped.

Have you ever thought much about the identity of Jesus' greatest opponents? Who were they? Were they the pimps and prostitutes who broke up families and suckered people into haunting addictions? Were they people like the owners and managers of Pure Pleasure? You

know that business that constructed sky-high electronic signs along Interstate 90 to entice people into bondage. Were folks like them the greatest opponents of Jesus? How about the greedy merchants who profited with dishonest scales and devoured the unsuspecting and vulnerable in their quest for money? Were Jesus' greatest opponents people like the corrupt executives of Enron, Global Crossing and others who sent our stock market plummeting as they padded their bank accounts? Were Jesus' greatest opponents the government leaders who pedaled influence and became rich by collecting more taxes than people owed? Who did Jesus call snakes and vipers? Who did Jesus identify as children of the devil and who demanded Jesus' death?

Who opposed the Apostle Paul? Who stoned him? Who beat him? Who pursued him from town to town? Who took vows to not eat until he was dead? Businessmen in Ephesus caused a riot when Paul's preaching cut into their idol-making profits. They were opponents, but they did not pursue him from town to town. Who were Paul's greatest enemies?

In the 18th Century, England teetered on the precipice of revolution. Social and moral conditions had so deteriorated that adultery was a stigma for the victim, not the perpetrator. In that time, who maligned John Wesley the leader of spiritual renewal? Who assaulted and kidnapped his followers who were called Methodists? Who banned him from preaching in church after church? Who were his greatest opponents?

Jesus, the Apostle Paul and John Wesley suffered most from those who were devout and honored for their faith. They suffered more from the clergy than they did from the criminals. They suffered more from the scholars than they did from the addicts. They suffered from lay leaders. They suffered from religious worshipers who were considered to be the "faithful."

Over the years I've heard many preachers note this truth and blame the idea of intolerance. They think intolerance crucified Jesus. They think intolerance pursued the Apostle

Paul. They think intolerance persecuted the early Methodists. They think intolerance is the dragon that pursued their heroes; and they couldn't be more wrong. The problem was never intolerance. Blaming intolerance is like blaming someone's closed mouth for not breathing. If someone's not breathing, there is a whole lot more wrong than a closed mouth. What was behind the battles that Jesus, the Apostle Paul and John Wesley faced was a lot more than intolerance. Listen to Jesus' parable.

Two men praying at the temple called out to God. One had devoted himself to knowing God's laws. He read, taught and followed God's laws as he understood them. He was respected for it. The other had devoted himself to making money. He gave up friendships, surrendered respect and sold out his integrity to make money. He swindled people so that he could live in luxury. These two entered the temple and called out to God. The first, a Pharisee, prayed:

God, I thank you that I am not like other men-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. (Luke 18:11-12, NIV)

The second, a tax collector, stood at a distance, wouldn't even look up to heaven, and while he prayed, he pounded his chest and cried:

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. (Luke 18:13, NIV)

Jesus said that only one of the two men left that temple with God's acceptance and favor. The crook who cried rather than the congregant who crowed found mercy. The crook sought a savior and got one. The congregant or Pharisee thought his behavior was good enough. He didn't need a savior. He was doing all right in his own eyes. He thanked God for how he was doing supposing that God had helped him. He saw no need for a savior and received none.

Do you think the Pharisee got a raw deal there? That's what the religious people thought who lined up to crucify Jesus. That's what the believers felt who chased the Apostle Paul out of

town after town. That's why respected Christians tried to shut John Wesley up? None of them wanted to believe that their attitudes and behaviors were evil and deserved condemnation. None wanted to think that they deserved judgment. They thought that their faith and their acts of faith made them acceptable to God. They did not suffer grief over their evil-doing. They did not see the harm of their ways. Either they felt their sins were insubstantial or inconsequential; and when they were confronted, they became angry. Jesus told his disciples:

The world... hates me because I testify that what it does is evil. (John 7:7, NIV)

Why did Jesus solicit such hate from the religious? He testified that what they were doing was evil. Their attitudes and actions were righteous in their own eyes. They followed the Bible as they believed, but they were estranged from God and destroying themselves, others and the world. They were self-righteous. All righteousness achieved by our efforts is self-righteous. Self-righteousness is an oxymoron. It's not righteous at all. It's prideful, condemning, hurtful and alienating. It sows so much pain and destruction in marriages, families, churches, and communities. When we are self-righteous, we think others would be like us if they tried harder. We also think God must be an ogre to judge us. We become judges of God.

Paul wrote to the Roman Christians:

The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. (Romans 9:30-32, NIV)

When you try to be righteous, you always, always, always fail. When you try to be good and live by God's standard, you redefine and reinterpret it so that you're keeping it in your own eyes, although you continue to do great damage. It is a trap. However, when the Gentiles that Paul talked about put their faith in Jesus, they received a forgiveness, compassion and new spirit that produced love for others, gentleness, peace, kindness. They found righteousness was being

produced within them as they received ministry and became more intimate with Jesus. They experienced an inward renewal that sowed healing in their attitudes, actions and relationships. Once in his letter to the Galatians, Paul rebuked the Christians because they had started a new life by receiving forgiveness and love in Jesus, but then began putting their faith in their obedience to the law. They thought they were some how more acceptable to God because they followed the standards they read in the Bible. Paul wrote, “*Foolish Galatians*” (Galatians 3:1-5), and he told them they were “*Bewitched!*” They were acceptable solely because they were forgiven. Through that repentance and forgiveness, God’s Spirit would produce change.

Twenty-one years ago this spring I walked into a meeting of parishioners, established to help me grow as a pastor. I was comfortable because they were trusted friends who met with me weekly. My closest friend led the group. He was a chemical dependency counselor by trade. The meeting turned uncomfortable when he practiced his trade on me. I was confronted with broken commitments, unfulfilled promises, misleading statements, and hurtful words and actions. Each time I defended myself. Then I was confronted with why I defended myself each time, whether I needed to be righteous in my own eyes and whether I was really open to the see and hear the hurt I caused in others. I felt embarrassed. I felt ashamed. My body shook as I felt so exposed and as I realized that my best efforts victimized others. I could have gotten mad, stopped listening and walked out. I was utterly broken. What I didn’t realize was how hard it was for that small group. The confrontation caused them great pain because they loved me. Some went home and cried. In the end, all I could do was say, “I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.” That day I was stripped of my self-righteousness. I could not move a step forward thinking I was righteous. Instead, I was wholly dependent on forgiveness, patience, compassion, and understanding that flowed from more than my vision.

Like the Galatians I had started out trusting that I was accepted by God because of Jesus' death and sacrifice. Somehow, I had grown to think that I was righteous and acceptable because I mostly fulfilled my standard of righteousness as I interpreted the Bible. When that was ripped away, I found acceptance not just from my friends, but from God who sacrificed his son for me. If you want to know freedom, that's real freedom. You are no longer in bondage from the need to believe you're okay. You are free to see yourself as you are with all the hurt and sin; and you still experience peace, not because your sins aren't that bad but because Jesus died to remove them and is cleaning you up and sowing healing.

Sometimes, God uses a study like ALPHA or a weekend experience like Walk to Emmaus, Promise Keepers, Women of Faith or Acquire the Fire to help people out of the trap. Sometimes, it takes painful confrontation like I experienced or like Jesus, Paul and John Wesley brought. Whatever the case, whether you have been like the Jews in Paul's letter to the Romans who have tried all your life to be acceptable to God, or whether you started out like the Galatians receiving forgiveness and then found yourself trusting that your behavior commended you, God wants you out of the righteous trap and filled with his love. Are you ready to repudiate your righteousness and rely on the forgiveness of Christ? Will your vision of right and wrong direct you or will you surrender that and put your hope in Christ? Resist the bewitching draw of self-righteousness, and bend your knee to Christ. In his forgiveness is the righteousness for which you thirst.