



"There are only two kinds of men: the righteous who believe themselves sinners; the sinners who believe themselves righteous."  
—Blaise Pascal

**10-Apr-09**

## **On Self-Righteousness**

[II Corinthians 13:5](#) charges us with the responsibility of examining ourselves. This is appropriate at any time during the year, but it is especially helpful as we prepare to take the [Passover](#) and renew our covenant with [God](#) through [Jesus Christ](#). One very important area to search out concerns self-righteousness because it lies at the root of many other sins.

We can see what self-righteousness produces in the case of a teenager who thinks he knows more than his parents do. Being right in his own eyes, he does what he wants to do regardless of the counsel of his older, wiser parents, whom he considers to be "out of touch," inconsiderate, or too demanding. He puts himself above his parents. The major difference between him and us is that we do this out of disrespect for God!

Everybody is self-righteous. No one escapes this plague because we are all human and subject to human nature's inherent carnality. Because we are self-centered, self-righteousness will follow as surely as water runs downhill. Much could be said about self-righteousness, but we will limit our focus to just a few brief aspects of it.

The first is how very bad it is. [Isaiah 64:6](#) informs us, "We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags." This certainly puts human righteousness in a bad light compared to what is truly good. God Himself is making this judgment, and He makes His comparison against His own righteousness. Measured like this, all of what we do that we consider our righteousness is filthy! Yet, human nature loves to compare itself with others less than God, and by such means we come out smelling like a rose. Human nature tends to isolate one aspect of another's personality or character and conclude that in comparison, the self is pretty good.

However, the problem is that this is not a comparison our Judge, God, finds acceptable. Human nature likes to consider itself as good. That is not too hard to do because, as judged by human standards, the overwhelming majority of humankind—those ordinary people who are not out murdering their neighbor, robbing the local food mart, or dealing drugs—is reasonably good. Human nature tends to judge itself against such, so the standards are not exceedingly high.

Notice what Jesus says to people of this sort: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" ([Matthew 7:11](#)). Notice that Jesus, God in the flesh, judges these people to be evil! Nothing in the context indicates that they were anything but run-of-the-mill citizens of the area. They were not Al Capone and his mafia mob! This is in perfect alignment with [Isaiah 64:6](#) and [Matthew 19:17](#), where Jesus says, "No one is good but One, that is, God." He judges them to be evil, even though what they were doing was essentially a good work, giving good gifts to their children. We can see that some element must be missing from the acts of human nature apart from God that He finds unacceptable.

Jesus' parable in [Luke 18:9-14](#), the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, tells us a great deal. Verse 9 immediately informs us that the self-righteous think highly of themselves, looking down on others as beneath them in the qualities that the self-righteous consider important to their self-evaluation. We should not make the mistake of adhering too tightly to what this Pharisee regards as important, for being puffed up about one's qualities is not limited to his. Esteeming one's own qualities can be extended to athletic skills, dressmaking, musical accomplishments, cooking, mechanical things,

clothing, housing, driving ability, IQ, academic accomplishments, and so forth. There is no limit to what human nature will identify in a person to puff itself up as better than others.

Verse 13 relates the major difference between the two men, which is a key to understanding how self-righteousness can be overcome. The difference lies in the fact that the tax collector recognizes his spiritual poverty, whereas the Pharisee, despite all his accomplishments, is totally ignorant of it. This dissimilarity made all the difference in [the world](#) in the manner that each approached God. The tax collector came appealing for mercy because he could see he had in his heart and character nothing to offer God. In contrast, the Pharisee boasted of his accomplishments, feeling he was rich in righteousness and deserved praise.

The tax collector's recognition of his spiritual poverty provides insight as to why being "[poor in spirit](#)" is listed first among those virtues that lead one toward the [Kingdom of God](#) ([Matthew 5:3](#)). One who is poor in spirit realizes that he has nothing to offer God that is of any good, spiritual quality at all. He will therefore eagerly and approvingly listen to God's counsel and use it to glorify God. He goes to God seeking His qualities, not boasting of his own as if he were God's equal. This is why, when preparing for [baptism](#), it is essential that we understand that we are not merely to [repent](#) of the sins we have committed, but that we must also repent of what we *are*, because it is what we are that generates what we do!

We are self-righteous, but we need to become God-righteous. This is why none of our works can earn justification. All of our acts before conversion are tainted by the fact that they are constantly under the influence of [Satan](#) and this world despite the fact that some of them are even "good."

The episode in [Luke 7:36-48](#), where the sinful woman washes Christ's feet, provides us with another key to understanding and overcoming self-righteousness. The key begins to unfold in verses 41-42 in the question, "Who will [love](#) Him more?" and its answer, "The one whom He forgave more." The key lies in yielding to the right use of God-given knowledge.

The woman is aware of her many sins; to her, as to the tax collector, they are obvious. Again, the Pharisee is unaware of his spiritual poverty. He looks

down on the woman. In addition, and very importantly, he does not recognize Jesus for what He is (verse 39). The self-righteous do not know God, thus he never thinks about showing Jesus any love whatever.

Yet, the woman is full of love for Jesus, and she recognizes Jesus' love for her, which He shows in His forgiveness of her. The woman, using the knowledge of what she is, of her sinfulness, and of her forgiveness by Jesus, pours out acts of love on the One she perceives she is indebted to for revealing the depths of her spiritual poverty. She does not pour out her love to get forgiveness but because she recognizes her sins and knows she is forgiven and is therefore indebted. The Pharisee acknowledges no indebtedness at all because he is altogether blind to his spiritual poverty. Thus, he does not even realize that he needs any forgiveness!

Self-righteousness is rooted in spiritual ignorance of the reality of what we are—not merely what we do—compared to God, not other men. The self-righteous is blind to true spiritual richness because he is so wrapped up in himself that he frankly does not know God. He does not see Him. In [Philippians 3:3](#), Paul writes that a Christian has "no confidence in the flesh." The apostle had an enviable pedigree, a steady pattern of good conduct, and an admirable zeal for what he believed to be right. However, he counted those things as mere rubbish compared to his knowledge of Christ (verse 8). This is a great pattern.

At this time, it is urgent and essential that we ask God to reveal Himself and His Son to us more forcefully and obviously so that we may comprehend more clearly the spiritual differences between us and them. When we realize these differences, we can seek forgiveness and appreciate Christ with a more correct understanding of these essential truths.

- John W. Ritenbaugh

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [Presumptuousness](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Individuals arrogating to themselves the authority to change doctrine are on extremely dangerous ground, presumptuously or boldly setting up idols in place of God. We dare not put words into God's mouth. The work of God in the latter days is to turn the people from their sin and back to God. Any other work is either window dressing or directly contrary to God. The consequences of presumptuous (intentional) sins are far more deadly and permanent than for sins committed in ignorance (unintentional). Presumptuousness equates to competition with God, following in the footsteps of Satan. The antidote to presumption is to 1) submit to God, 2) remain humble, and 3) wait for Him to exalt us.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[Righteousness from Inside-Out](#)**

by David F. Maas

Many people, even in the church, fail to understand the kind of righteousness God is looking for. David Maas shows that God wants it written on our hearts—not just a set of dos and don'ts or rewards and punishments.

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