

## Overcoming (Part 3): Self-Righteousness

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In the children's fable, "The Emperor's New Clothes," the monarch's clothing is invisible, entirely a figment of his imagination. The emperor's view of himself has no substance in truth. He walks about as if clothed in the finest raiment, but in reality he exposes his true condition—nakedness. Similarly, self-righteousness, a root of Laodiceanism, is a most difficult sin to recognize since it is a matter of attitude rather than action. It is complacency in its worse form because it involves regarding oneself as more virtuous than others despite the reality of a deficient spiritual condition.

This lie was introduced first by Helel out of his rebellious attitude. Regarding Satan, Ezekiel writes, "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor" (Ezekiel 28:17). He became greater and more righteous in his own eyes than his Creator. So also being righteous in our own eyes spiritually exposes our sin to God. This Bible study will analyze this dangerous impediment to overcoming.

1. Does a self-righteous person see his sin for what it is? Job 32:1-2; 33:9; Psalm 19:12-13; Isaiah 46:12; 64:6; Revelation 3:17.

**Comment:** Job's three friends cannot convince him of his unrighteousness, not merely because he is righteous in his own evaluation, but also because their arguments have no effect on him. He seems determined to keep his own opinion of himself in spite of all their reasoning. God inspires Isaiah to warn Israel that all their "righteousnesses are like filthy rags," since their sinful attitudes pollute their deeds. The impurity of their motives taint all their prayers, sacrifices, offerings, and praises, thus God deeply detests and abhors them. Like the Laodiceans, they cannot see their true condition.

2. What are some manifestations and characteristics of self-righteousness? Matthew 6:1-2, 5, 16; 7:1-5; John 8:3-9; II Corinthians 10:12.

**Comment:** The Pharisee stands and prays—common in and of itself—but this Pharisee apparently wants to be noticed. "With himself" refers to his attitude rather than to his position; he is praying to himself or for himself, rather than by himself. Though his conduct is probably as good as he claims, the problem is not with his actions but with his self-righteous attitude. We can see an indication of this in ourselves when we think others do not live up to "our" standards. Sometimes this manifests itself in correcting, judging and complaining about others.

3. Does everyone have at least some problem with self-righteousness? Job 29:1-25; Luke 18:9-14; Romans 3:9-12; James 3:13-16.

**Comment:** It is essential to realize that self-righteousness is "the me in me"! Constantly using oneself as an example of how to do something right often reveals self-centeredness, a root of self-righteousness (notice the use of "I," "me," and "my" in Job

29:1-25 and Luke 18:11-12). Also, being described as "holier-than-thou" or "a goody-goody," not for righteousness but for a superior attitude—and maybe for hypocrisy—suggests self-righteousness.

4. Does self-righteousness sometimes manifest itself outwardly as righteousness? II Samuel 15:1-6; Matthew 23:25-28; II Timothy 3:1-5.

**Comment:** Absalom gives the appearance of virtue, but in truth, he has far less wisdom and understanding than his father David. The Pharisees are infamous for deceiving the people into thinking their self-righteousness is righteousness. Though they follow the letter of the law with great pride, they have no wisdom to apply the law properly. True wisdom is the right use of spiritual knowledge, and without it, they do not understand the spirit of the law. Even obeying the letter of God's law for reasons of pride and personal gain cannot prevent self-righteousness. Conversely, our good deeds should be a light (Matthew 5:14-16), and a light makes no noise unless something is wrong with it.

5. How does self-righteousness compare with true righteousness? Romans 3:19-26; 10:2-4; Philippians 3:8-9.

**Comment:** Paul says that a righteous relationship with God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who submit to God's righteousness. Submission requires obedience. All have sinned and fall short of His glory, but God has put us into a righteous relationship with Him by grace through Christ. "For by His grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

In his writings, Paul contrasts the righteousness that is God's gift to men of faith in Jesus Christ to self-righteousness, which is "of the law" and "in the flesh." In this sense, self-righteousness is formal conformity to legal requirements based in one's human nature rather than in the faith of Christ. True righteousness is a humble relationship between man and God and between man and man that promotes well-being and peace. Since God Himself is the standard of righteousness, He defines righteous action. In contrast, self-righteousness is a rejection of God, the righteous standard.

Because of its self-centered nature, self-righteousness destroys a relationship's unity. Because righteousness is God-centered, a righteous person will submit and conform to the demands and obligations of His will, and this produces a right relationship. This right relationship is what will unify us in the church and in God's Kingdom!