

# *It Is Written*

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## **The Sin of Self Righteousness**

By Steven Harper

Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of the first century, often because they had a too-high view of themselves. When He was at the house of Simon [a Pharisee], a woman who was known to be a sinner came in and began to wash His feet with her tears, wiping them dry with her hair, and anointing them with fragrant oil (Luke 7:36-38). When the Pharisee saw this, he thought to himself, "This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Jesus, knowing his thoughts, told a story of a creditor who had two debtors who were both unable to pay their debts (Luke 7:41-42). The point of the story was to show the Pharisee that though this woman was indeed a sinner, so was the Pharisee; neither this woman nor the Pharisee had the ability to pay for their sins and they were essentially in the same boat (Luke 7:44-48). The Pharisee's problem, however, was that he thought himself more righteous than the woman. He was so self-righteous he could not see his own sin!

On another occasion, Jesus told a parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others" (Luke 18:9). In the parable, a Pharisee "stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess'" (Luke 18:11-12). Another man, a tax collector, "standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'" (Luke 18:13). Jesus noted that the latter man was the one who returned to his home justified, "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). This is reminiscent of the time when Jesus noted that some who were invited to a wedding feast would choose the best places and instructed them to instead seek the low places and allow others to exalt them, "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:7-11). The root problem of these individuals, we find, is that they thought too highly of themselves.

And this is the root problem of the self-righteous. Those who find no fault with themselves [or who reject any suggestion by others that they have faults], but who find numerous faults in others, are guilty of blatant arrogance in that they see themselves as perfect in knowledge or [in many cases] righteousness and have no qualms about holding themselves up as the example by which they compare all others. Anyone who does not believe exactly as they believe, wear what they wear, study the same number of hours or minutes they do, or phrase things exactly as they would have phrased it is suspect. God's word is not the standard and not even Christ is the standard; they are the standard. This was seen most clearly in the religious leaders who had sent officers to arrest Jesus but were thwarted by those same officers who, after hearing Jesus, replied, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" (John 7:46). When the religious leaders heard this, they said, "Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed" (John 7:47-49). In this one scene, they revealed their obvious self-righteousness by holding themselves up as the standard and denigrating the common people who believed in Jesus.

I wish I could say that there are none like these men within the church today, but we have all probably seen them with our own eyes and heard them with our own ears. Maybe we have been those people. Whenever a man believes he is absolutely right and will not even fathom the possibility that he

is wrong; whenever he is quick to label anyone who disagrees with him as a false teacher; whenever he will argue a point even after he has been shown to be speaking contradictory to Scripture; whenever he will rally others to "his" view while simultaneously trying to denigrate the character of one who disagrees; whenever he is quick to label teachings others than his own as either 'liberal' or 'tradition' — these are signs of self-righteousness.

Self-righteousness is not just an inflated view of self, but it is coupled with a view of others as inferior. It is enough that the self-righteous belief they are the standard by which all others should be judged, but they go further in applying that belief and conclude that all others must, naturally, be inferior to themselves. This superiority complex spills over into how they then treat others. The self-righteous will look down upon those who should be seen as their equals. Instead of seeing their brethren as "all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28), it is more like, "I am one in Christ; the rest of you have a lot of room for improvement." He sits in Bible class and hears God's word spoken, but when it is time for application, all he thinks about is how those words apply to someone else, or even how someone else misapplies it. He sneers at the very idea that he should look in the mirror and see if he needs to apply it to himself, or if he has applied the Scriptures properly. In his self-righteousness, he comes close to looking at himself only to see if Scripture happens to agree with him!

The self-righteous will complain loudly about how his brethren are "worldly" as he sits back, drinking his beer, accumulating the latest material possessions, and watching R-rated movies. He sees a babe in Christ struggling with sin and marks him off as a lost cause, instead of attempting to "restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness, considering" himself (Galatians 6:1). He smugly says to himself, "I would never commit that sin!" He looks at those of the world and thinks, "Oh, if only they were as righteous as I." He does not consider that they live as they do because no one has ever taught them the right way. Even those whom he sees who are trying to find the truth are not exempt; if they, in their ignorance, do or say anything not just exactly as he so self-righteously defines as 'right' then they are dismissed without any attempt to lovingly guide them in the right way — because there is no real love for their souls. If they call the preacher 'pastor' or talk about their worship as 'mass' or a 'devotional' they are marked off as hopeless and he refocuses on himself where everything is right and good and if everyone was just like him, things would be all right! Or so he thinks to himself.

Self-righteousness, by definition, is an attitude of contentment with one's own righteousness, especially when smugly moralistic and intolerant of the opinions and behavior of others. Do you notice that the focus of the self-righteous is self? Christ is not the center of his thinking; self is! He does not think about the background and environment in which others might have been raised; he has somehow come to believe that everyone should see things exactly as he does, no matter what their background. The one who was raised in the inner-city and who went to sleep to the sound of gunfire, whose parents were never around to teach him right from wrong, and who struggled to stay away from gangs and guns and drugs — to him — is without excuse and undeserving of mercy, much less his time and energy to help lead them to the Lord.

I believe we would do well to heed the words of the writer of Hebrews and "fix our eyes" on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). When we look at Jesus, we will not be looking at others and worrying about whether or not they match up with our own righteousness. We will not because we will not be looking at ourselves, either. Let Christ be the standard and realize you will never equal His righteousness here on earth. Without Him, we have no ability to attain true righteousness.

The cure for self-righteousness is mercy, humility, and compassion.