

The Secret Sin Everyone Commits

Self-righteousness

Martin G. Collins

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You may have a flaw that almost no one sees! I may have a flaw that almost no one sees!

You and I probably do not see this flaw in ourselves—and we probably never have, and never will. Everyone without realizing it, is guilty of this flaw from time to time. This sin is idolatrous, and even satanic.

Let me give you a hint. The 20th century, German-born, U.S. psychoanalyst and social philosopher, Erich Fromm, is credited with saying, "There is perhaps no phenomenon which contains so much destructive feeling as moral indignation, which permits envy or hate to be acted out under the guise of virtue."

In this present society, people are very quick to point out what they perceive to be self-righteousness, that is, when anyone makes a judgment that someone else's action is wrong.

If you comment that gluttony is a character flaw, not a genetic disease, you are judged "self-righteous!" If you state openly that homosexuality is a sin, you are marked with the label "self-righteous!" If you voice your opinion that a porn star is lewd and perverted, you are labeled "self-righteous!"

This society has lost its ability to properly distinguish between self-righteousness and true righteous behavior. But that does not rule out the fact that all human beings are prone to self-righteousness.

Proverbs 20:6 Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, but who can find a faithful man?

Self-righteousness is a matter of attitude rather than an action. The result of this attitude, however, may manifest itself in action. This attitude may be defined as one's own estimation or valuation of oneself as more righteous or superior than others. God certainly demands that His people be righteous, but not righteous according to human standards, righteous according to God's standards. On the other hand, self-righteousness is a type of pride.

Some synonyms of "self-righteous" are: sanctimonious, smug, pharisaical, hypocritical, insincere, mealy-mouthed, pompous, pious, moralizing, pretentious, holier-than-thou. Most of these synonyms are generally seen through the world's eyes as overt actions. Mostly, this action is manifested in verbal communication by statements from the mouth.

But the true seriousness of the prideful sin of self-righteousness is not heard or seen. It is covert. Members of God's true church are rarely guilty of overt self-righteousness. As we work to overcome sin we try very hard to refrain from verbal expressions of our disdain for another member's actions.

God made it clear to the Israelites that they did not receive the blessing of possessing the Promised Land because of their own righteousness, but because of the wickedness of the Gentile nations.

In Deuteronomy 9, Moses reviewed Israel's rebellions. He points out that the greatness of the Lord, not any excellence of the Israelites, was to be the basis for Israel's acquisition of Canaan. Prior to this, in Deuteronomy 7, Moses made it clear that God's choice of them was not because of their numerical superiority, nor because of their goodness.

Here in chapter 9, he added that their entrance into the land would not be because of their righteousness either. To support his evaluation, Moses launched into a long narration of the people's former defiance and of the Lord's goodness and greatness.

Deuteronomy 9:1-2 Hear, O Israel: You are to cross over the Jordan today, and go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourself, cities great and fortified up to heaven, "a people great and tall, the descendants of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you heard it said, 'Who can stand before the descendants of Anak'"

Moses had an adequate answer to this proverbial saying, "Who can stand before the descendants of Anak?" This popular saying indicated the Anakite strength. Moses said, "Israel can, with the help of God".

Deuteronomy 9:3 Therefore understand today that the LORD your God is He who goes over before you as a consuming fire. He will destroy them and bring them down before you; so you shall drive them out and destroy them quickly, as the LORD has said to you.

The Lord is the One who "goes over before you," another way of saying, "crosses the Jordan" ahead of you. When God's people must accomplish a work, God always goes before them.

The affirmation that God would lead Israel into the Promised Land appears throughout the accounts of the Exodus, the desert wanderings, and the conquest of Canaan, and is a major theme throughout the Old Testament. It was God who led His people, and He destroyed and subdued the Canaanites by empowering the Israelites.

Almost in the same breath, Moses said that Israel would drive out the inhabitants and that God would have driven them out, indicating again that Israel's abilities were from God. At best the Israelites were God's instruments. It was not Israelite righteousness, but Canaanite wickedness that caused the Canaanites to be displaced from their own land.

God made it abundantly clear to Israel that He drove the Gentile nations out so that the Israelites could occupy the land. He warned Israel not to think for a moment that it was because of their goodness. It was not because of their righteousness! It was because God promised Abraham that they would be given the land. But the wickedness of the Canaanites made their land available because they no longer deserved to keep it. Granted, Israel did not deserve to receive it either, but God was going to fulfill His promise to Abraham

Deuteronomy 9:4-6 Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them out before you, saying, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land' but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you. "It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "Therefore understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people.

Three times in this account, Moses said that God would drive out the Canaanites. As a matter of fact, Israel's own behavior shows that she was an intractable people and, consequently, not deserving of the good land. When God says something in His written

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word three times it is important, and we should take note of it.

Apply this now to our situation in God's Church. We are not righteous enough to deserve the good land—the Kingdom. We cannot earn our way into the Kingdom. But God will go before us preparing the way, working to develop our character along the way, leading us into the "Promised Land," the "good land"—the Kingdom and eternal life!

Moses warned the Israelites against being self-righteous—a warning that we in God's Church are wise to heed. Paul wrote to Titus that our efforts toward righteousness, such as it is, are not on the same plain as God's work in us. It means that no matter how hard we work toward righteousness, it does not have the same effect and the power that God's work in us does.

Titus 3:3-5 For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

God's plan is not based on our own good works; neither do our own good works bring about salvation. If people could be saved by their own good works, there would be no need of salvation by the Redeemer. If our own deeds were now the basis of our receiving eternal life, there would have been no need for the sacrifice and the work of Christ.

It is a fundamental principle of the Word of God that our good works have no bearing on our justification. The only basis of justification is the merit of the Jesus Christ. Of course, our works are required and our reward, the capacity or the magnitude of our reward, will partly bear upon our works, but not salvation itself and not eternal life and not the Kingdom of God.

In a sermon on self-righteousness we cannot avoid going to the book of Job. As righteous as Job was he still suffered from self-righteousness. A self-righteous person does not see his sin for what it really is. Job was so certain of his blameless life, that he seemed ready to march into the presence of God. The attempt of his friends to convince him of his sinfulness had failed and they did not see that anything Job had to say at that point had any redeeming value. The friends had no more to say because they

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considered him a hopeless hypocrite that would not listen to them.

Job 32:1-2 So these three men ceased answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. Then the wrath of Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, was aroused against Job; his wrath was aroused because he justified himself rather than God.

His three friends could not convince him of his self-righteousness. It was not merely because he was righteous in his own estimation. This is not why they ceased to answer him; it was because their arguments had no effect in convincing him, and they had nothing new to add to what they had already at length told him. He seemed to be obstinately bent on maintaining his own good opinion of himself in spite of all their reasoning, and they sat down in silence, probably with a sigh not knowing what else to say. This is typical with all human beings, because we do not want to see this attitude in us. We have to ask God to reveal it to us, that is, if we are guilty of it. Most likely if we are a human being, we are guilty of self-righteousness at least at times. It takes God's Holy Spirit and prayer to God to actually make it apparent in us. It is such a subtle and covert sin.

Job 33:8-9 Surely you have spoken in my hearing, and I have heard the sound of your words, saying, 'I am pure, without transgression; I am innocent, and there is no iniquity in me.'

Job's three friends cannot convince him of his self-righteousness, because he is blinded by his own righteousness and that is pretty obvious by Scripture.

God inspired Isaiah to warn Israel that all their "righteousnesses are like filthy rags," since their sinful attitudes polluted all of their good deeds, if they had any at that time at all. The impurity of their motives taint all their prayers, sacrifices, offerings, and praises, thus God deeply detests and abhors all of that in a self-righteous person. Like the Laodiceans, they cannot see their true condition because it is such a subtle sin.

Isaiah 64:6 But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

This is the general condition of all human beings because of sin. Of course, we in God's

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church have the wonderful advantage of being able to repent of our sins and being forgiven for them.

Let us look at a few characteristic symptoms of self-righteousness.

The Pharisee stands and prays, which was common practice as the Pharisees wanted to be noticed. "Within 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 may be 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. Self-righteous people rebel against God's instruction to think this way. God specifically instructs us not to judge others, to condemn others, or to think ill of others.

Sometimes this manifests itself in various symptoms. Let me just give you five symptoms that we can actually use to search out self-righteousness in ourselves. There are, of course, many more.

I. Self-righteous people trust in their own hearts.

Proverbs 28:26 "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but whoever walks wisely will be delivered."

We will see later that "wisely" does not mean "worldly wisdom," it means "Godly wisdom" of course. Self-righteous people place confidence, or faith, in something or someone. In the case of self-righteousness they place confidence in themselves. Without realizing it, they listen to, and trust only themselves.

II. Self-righteous people are wise in their own eyes.

He who seems wise to himself—in his own eyes—is exceptionally unwise. But his self-conceit is the motivational tool or standard by which he measures his progress.

Proverbs 14:12 "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

This sin is a common flaw in humanity.

Proverbs 26:12 "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

Again, the inspired Word of God is very blunt on the subject of one who seems wise in his own eyes. He is no less than a fool, and none of us want to be fools. A person who is wise in his own conceit—who has only a little sense of the application of God's way of life, but is proud of his own knowledge—thinks he has a better handle on God's way of life than he really does. He thinks he has more understanding than any of his friends or acquaintances. The natural result is that he will look down on those of his brethren or friends.

He thinks he has enough knowledge already, so much so that he needs no more. His conceit of his own abilities makes him opinionated. It is knowledge gathered in vain, and all of his use of his own knowledge does nothing more than puff him up.

In a similar vein, if the wise man is a religious man, it describes the character of those who have a form of religion, but have no substance or basis in truth. They may have a knowledge of the truth, but they do not have a complete understanding of its application. They conclude that their spiritual state is good when really it is badly distorted, like the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:17.

Isaiah 5:21 "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!"

There are numerous scriptures that warn us of this very thing. Self-righteous people trust in themselves to determine what is right or wrong. That is a key to self-righteousness, they trust in themselves.

III. Self-righteous people justify themselves.

This is applicable to the hypocritical self-justifiers of Christ's time.

Luke 16:14-15 Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

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Here we see another warning. Human nature looks for the wrong things to hold in high esteem or regard. Self-righteous people are self-justified. They do not realize that they base their salvation upon their own works. They are their own forgiver of error and sin. It is ironic that they base their attitudes on ignorance of the right application of God's way of life.

Proverbs 21:2 "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts."

There we see the key. In order to find self-righteousness within, if we have any, we have to rely on God's Holy Spirit. We must pray for God's help to show us our secret sins, and to look at our heart, our mind as the source of the self-righteousness.

IV. Self-righteous people despise others.

Openly, they do not think that they despise others, but they have a disregard or a downward feeling towards others. They may inadvertently gloat over the inadequacies and mistakes of others.

The 19th century English economist and journalist, Walter Bagehot, is credited with saying, "Nothing is more unpleasant than a virtuous person with a mean mind."

Paul explained the law of liberty to the Romans. He included the self-righteous issue of despising others.

Romans 14:1-3 Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.

What he is saying here is that people will be called into God's church at all levels of understanding and because someone does not fully understand God's truth does not mean that we are to look down upon them. Here Paul even uses the strong word "despise" or judge. It goes both ways. Self-righteous people may despise someone being less careful than they are, or more careful than they are. This also applies to those who will not fellowship with other brethren because their fellowship is not intellectually stimulating enough for them or they do not think their conversation is

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righteous enough. People who shun brethren for this reason are self-righteous and do not see it. It is a real shame that this happens as people are at all levels of overcoming and at all levels of conversion.

V. Self-righteous people judge, condemn and are unforgiving.

Self righteous people are corrective. They see themselves as the standard of righteousness because they believe they are greatly gifted in expressing God's way of life. But, in reality, their gift only finds its strength in human reasoning.

Matthew 7:1-5 Judge not, that you be not judged. "For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

Those are frank statements and guarantees.

Matthew 7:3-5 "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?" Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? "Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

What we have here is a great key to many of our problems in life. When we are having relationship problems with others, we should look at our own faults first. We must determine to overcome flaws in our own lives first, then many, if not most, of our relationship problems will fade away. This goes for fellowship problems and problems we may be having in our marriages.

When someone asks me about a problem they may be having in marriage, one of the things I almost always tell them, or try to remember to tell them, is to go and pray, and ask God to show them what they are doing wrong in the relationship. Ask God to show you if you are doing anything wrong and then work from what He shows you, and do not worry about the other person. If you get your own life straight, and your own life right, then God will handle the other part of the problem. That is part of the problem that you do not have any control over, and actually do not have any authority over.

First, we look to our own selves, and then God will take care of the problem we are having with someone else. Let me ask this, "Did Jesus Christ have any relationship

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problems with people?" Absolutely not, not one. It was the people that had the relationship problems with Him. Others had relationship problems with Him, mostly because they were not looking at their own personal problems. They did not remove the plank from their own eye.

Luke 6:37 "Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

That is a pretty frank, plain, and crystal clear statement. Being merciful should always incline us not to condemn those whose faults are obvious, but are not willfully flagrant of sin. If a person in the congregation is flagrantly sinning, as was the case in the Corinthian church with the situation of incest, the people should not allow that to go on. What I am talking about is weakness, not willful sins but sins that are just done out of weakness. The person may be trying to overcome them but they continue to make that mistake. There are other scriptures to handle that type of situation such as going to your brother in love, and that is the key word, love. There is no love in self-righteousness. We should conceal other people's sins as much as we can without prejudice to truth and justice of God. Neither should we wish to expose them or desire to see them punished.

Matthew 6:14-15 For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Once again, a very direct and plain statement to everyone. By "forgive," Jesus meant that when someone asks us for forgiveness, we are to cordially and forever forgive the offense; we are to openly show our willingness to forgive him. If he does not ask forgiveness, we are still to treat him kindly and lovingly. We should not harbor malice, nor speak ill of him. And we should be ready to benefit him in his need, whenever it arises.

We should be ready to go above and beyond to forgive him again if he asks. If we are not ready and willing to forgive him, we can be sure that God will not forgive us. That is very serious, and very humbling and sobering.

Self-righteousness is contrary to the virtues of true wisdom.

Let us consider the man who wants to be a teacher in the church. Is gentleness a controlling element in his heart? If he has a fanatical bitterness and is motivated by

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selfish and personal ambition, then whatever claims he makes in his arrogance causes him to be false to the truth that he professes to teach. A scholar and a teacher are always under the temptation of arrogance and selfish ambition. We see the same things in the worldly positions of leadership in the politicians.

James wrote about the man who should never be a teacher. The reason relates to the kind of wisdom a person has. Self-righteousness can cause a person to have the wrong perspective on truth and therefore a wrong perspective on teaching.

James 3:13-14 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.

In my Bible it says heavenly versus demonic wisdom. We find four characteristics of the wrong kind of teaching in verse 14 to which self-righteousness is blind:

It is bitter envy. It regards its opponents as enemies to be annihilated rather than as friends to be persuaded. The give-away for self-righteousness is bitter envy.

It is self-seeking. Ultimately, it is more eager to display itself than to display the truth, and it is interested more in the promotion of its own opinions than in the promotion of the truth.

It is boastful. Its attitude is prideful in its knowledge rather than humble in its ignorance. The real scholar will be far more aware of what he does not know than of what he does know.

It is dishonestly fanatical. The truth it holds is held with unbalanced aggression rather than with Godly conviction.

James 3:15-16 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.

The most notable thing about the wrong kind of wisdom is that it brings about disorder. Instead of bringing people together, it drives them apart. Instead of producing peace, it

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produces conflict.

Some people are undoubtedly clever, with a keen mind and convincing tongue; but their effect in any church is to cause trouble and to disturb personal relationships. It is a frightening and a sobering thing to realize that the wisdom that the self-righteous person has is of satanic influence and is humanly reasoned in its base.

Now carrying on in James, in my Bible the caption says "The true wisdom". This is what we want to have.

James 3:17-18 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Let us notice for a moment how each of these virtues of true wisdom is an opposite characteristic of self-righteousness:

Pure. This is from the Greek word *hagnos*, which means, "moral purity or a mind which thinks holy thoughts." True wisdom is pure enough to reveal God. Pure thoughts enable us to reason more righteously. In contrast, self-righteousness is self-centered and feeds the ego. It is a corrupt wisdom that produces feelings of superiority, and which perverts relationships between people. Accusations are always flying back and forth in this society that someone else is self-righteous.

As an example I would like to read an article to you. This article appeared yesterday by Associated Press writer Mike Schneider. Keep in mind this issue of "purity" that we are looking at here in James 3:17 with regard to self-righteousness. The title of this article is "Teens Nationwide Promote Abstinence". Notice the word "purity" in it and "self-righteousness."

Melissa Millis feels bombarded by everyday messages of sexual promiscuity, whether it is Janet Jackson's bare breast during the Super Bowl, or her classmates casual sex talk.

So Millis, a high school senior in Michigan, and thousands of other students across the nation, plan to wear white T-shirts to school Friday, the day

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before Valentine's Day, to publicly show their commitment to not having sex outside marriage. They are calling their effort the "Day of Purity," and they will distribute pro-abstinence pamphlets to their peers.

"The way sex is talked about, it is so casual, like it is an everyday thing, like going to McDonald's," said Millis, 17.

The grass-roots effort is supported by Christian groups nationwide and organized by Liberty Counsel, a conservative religious rights group based in Orlando. It comes, as President Bush is pushing, in his budget proposal, to double federal funding for sexual abstinence programs. [Doubling does not mean a thing to me, because if he is only giving ten dollars to the program, and he doubles it, that is twenty dollars, and that is about all that is put forth towards that. That is not in the article by the way, that is an editorial comment.]

But the "Day of Purity" is being watched with a wary eye by groups that promote sexual tolerance, such as the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, and the Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. "The Day of Purity" website accuses those groups of "a counterfeit effort in the schools and media to turn our youth away from traditional values."

[This is the interesting part of the article.] "The word 'purity' in this context is morally self-righteous," said Alice Leeds, a spokeswoman for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. "It is redefining it in their context to conform to their frankly bigoted agenda." [What she said is that the word "purity" in this context is morally self-righteous. We see how this woman has so perverted what purity is and what it means. She is accusing these people, who are promoting this "Day of Purity", of self-righteousness, when she in her own statement says, "Redefining it in their context to conform to their frankly bigoted agenda".]

Eliza Byard, Deputy Executive Director for the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, said in an e-mail that her group applauded any effort to promote healthy sexual choices by young people.

"Unfortunately, this program seems to have a limited idea of what that means and does not appear designed to provide the kind of information students really need," she said. [Just what type is her gay and lesbian organization going to promote?]

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"Day of Purity" touches on a controversial social issue—how to teach sex education in schools, said Bill Barker, a spokesman for Advocates for Youth, a Washington-based group that helps youth make responsible decisions about sex.

"You are walking into one of the fiercest debates out there," Barker said. Participants said having the "Day of Purity" right before Valentine's Day is especially appropriate since teenagers often feel pressure to have sex with their girlfriends or boyfriends on the holiday. [There we see the real paganism behind the holiday and what its fruit is.]

"A lot of girls feel that in order to keep their relationship, they have to have sex," said Kelly Cruse, 16, who plans to pass out sexual abstinence literature at her high school in Illinois. "I think this need for acceptance is very destructive to a girl."

So this woman, who is part of this homosexual movement, defines the word "purity" in the context of morality as: "morally self-righteous." However, in verse 17 of God's inspired written word—The Bible—James uses the Greek word *hagno* translated into the English word "purity," meaning: "moral purity or a mind which thinks holy thoughts."

We see in this article an example of how important it is for wisdom to be pure. Pure of perversion, pure of human reasoning, and pure of self-righteousness. In the case of this article the meaning of purity was redefined by this advocate of homosexuality. I applaud these teenage girls who are standing up against immorality—they are wise beyond their years.

Let us look at the second virtue of true wisdom from verse 17.

Peaceable. This is from the Greek word *eirenikos*, which means, "the right relationship between man and man, and between man and God." Peace enables us to reason, without conflict or the urgency to save ourselves from verbal or physical harm. This virtue is always out flowing and giving in its effect. One of the most difficult things in the world is to argue without passion, and to meet arguments without humiliating or injuring the other person. To be utterly convinced of our own beliefs without being bitter to those of others is a very tough thing. In contrast, self-righteousness is presumptuous, clever and arrogant, which separates man from man, and man from God.

"Gentle" is from the Greek word *epieikes*, which is one of the most untranslatable of all Greek words, but means, "that which steps in to correct things when the law itself becomes unjust." The gentle person knows when it is actually wrong to apply the strict letter of the law because he reasons with meekness and love. There is the key—self-righteousness does not contain meekness and love. In contrast, self-righteousness is the attitude that unjustly judges others to be inferior spiritually. It reasons that others are not as good at keeping the law.

"Willing to yield" is from the Greek word *eupeithes*, which means, "not rigid and is willing to listen." This is the reasoning used to learn from others and from God's word. This person wisely knows when to yield, and to whom. In contrast, self-righteousness sees no value in the opinions of other brethren. It wants to impress others with knowledge, and is usually very forceful and opinionated, or at least has to have the last word.

"Full of mercy and good fruits". The term "mercy" is from the Greek word *eleos*, which means, "mercy for the man who is in trouble," even if the trouble is his own fault. This person is merciful in a way that issues in good fruits, or that issues in practical help. In other words, it is the person who is a blessing and a benefit to someone else.

James 2:13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

In contrast, self-righteousness is harsh in judging others and produces anguish. It produces nothing of any spiritual value. It causes others humiliation.

"Without partiality" is from the Greek word *adiakritos*, which means, "that favor is not wavering and vacillating according to whom it is directed." This person is always fair with everyone. In contrast, self-righteousness creates a vast gulf between people with more intellectual tendencies than the less educated. It causes a class system to form in the church.

"Without hypocrisy" is from the Greek word *anupokritos*, which means that a person's real intentions are not hidden by an act or eloquent speech, neither does he deal in deception. In contrast, self-righteousness may pretend to be what it is not—not always, but many times. Self-righteousness can cause us

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to be hypocritical if we are looking down on someone for the same thing for which we are guilty ourselves. Just to help give you a general definition, according to *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*, "Hypocrisy is a feigning to be what one is not; especially: the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion."

It pretends to be what, in reality, it is not. It especially has the pretense of virtue. The self-righteous person does not usually realize this pretense. It gets back to what we said at the very beginning of the sermon, that most people do not see their self-righteousness and I think it would almost be safe to say that no-one sees their self-righteousness unless they get God's help.

We can test our wisdom to see if it is heavenly or earthly—that is, whether it is true wisdom or self-righteous wisdom—by looking at the motive behind it and the fruit that it produces. Is it envious and self-seeking?

II Corinthians 10:12 For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

You could add to that, they do not have the virtues of wisdom.

Self-righteousness sometimes manifests itself outwardly in the appearance of righteousness. It is a term that has come to represent the appearance of moral living as a way of earning salvation; or as a ground for neglecting the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

The thought is present in the teaching of Jesus, who spoke a parable especially to those who thought of themselves as righteous.

The Pharisees quite generally resented the teaching of Jesus that all men needed repentance, and the Pharisees most of all. They regarded themselves as righteous and looked with contempt on "sinners."

Let us look at the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which I alluded to earlier.

Luke 18:9-14 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves

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that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. "The 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.' "And the 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!' "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

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 verses 11-12). The Pharisee was totally self-absorbed. It does not mean that we cannot give advice to others, but it is in the attitude and the heart that is involved in giving that advice, and whether they have asked for it or not is another good practice to follow.

Also, being described as "holier-than-thou" not for righteousness, but for a superior attitude—and maybe for hypocrisy—suggests self-righteousness.

We can see the same deception going on today in politics that Absalom used against his father King David. He was thoroughly versed in being the champion of the people; and the common people gladly swallowed the story they wanted to hear.

Just as today, he used the patriot's arguments, and he appeared to be the epitome of everything he promised. He found fault with the other leaders who may challenge him, but he only wanted their position and power, like all other pretended patriots, so that he could act as they did, or worse. This is an exact explanation or description of our politicians today.

II Samuel 15:1-6 After this it happened that Absalom provided himself with chariots and horses, and fifty men to run before him. Now Absalom would rise early and stand beside the way to the gate. So it was, whenever anyone who had a lawsuit came to the king for a decision, that Absalom would call to him and say, "What city are you from?" And he would say, "Your servant is from such and such a tribe of Israel." Then Absalom would say to him, "Look, your case is good and right; but there is no deputy of the king to hear you." Moreover Absalom would say, "Oh, that I were made judge in the land, and everyone who has any suit or cause would come to me; then I would

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give him justice." And so it was, whenever anyone came near to bow down to him, that he would put out his hand and take him and kiss him. In this manner Absalom acted toward all Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

He deceived the men of Israel. Absalom gives the appearance of virtue, but not in truth. He has far less wisdom and understanding than his father, David. In fact, he had nothing but useless worldly wisdom, manifested from his attitude of self-righteousness. That is all he had to offer the people, which was worse than nothing.

Similarly, the Pharisees were infamous for deceiving the people into thinking their self-righteousness was true righteousness. Though they followed the letter of the law with great pride, they had no wisdom to apply the law properly. Not only did the Pharisees deceive others, they had deceived themselves.

Paul wrote to the Galatians:

Galatians 3:6 "For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself."

So a self-righteous person deceives himself. True wisdom is the right use of spiritual knowledge with the help of the Holy Spirit, and without it, we cannot 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. On the other hand, our good deeds should be a light, and a light makes no noise unless something is wrong with it.

God condemns self-righteous attitudes, even when they seem to come from knowledge that is good. Godly wisdom is the right use of knowledge. It is not enough to accumulate knowledge if we do not apply that knowledge correctly. Just a very simple example or illustration is the person who has the bow and arrow and needs some food, and goes out and shoots the deer to eat, as opposed to the person who takes the bow and arrow and goes out and shoots a person. Both may have had a right skill of the bow and arrow, but one used that knowledge correctly, and the other used that knowledge incorrectly.

Romans 2:17-20 Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself

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are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

They had the form, but they did not have the substance, knowledge or wisdom, to apply it correctly. The natural tendency of human beings is to want to determine, based on their own knowledge, what is good and what is evil. People substitute their own opinion of what is good in place of God's righteous judgment. If a person is contrary to God's righteousness, and contrary to what God says is good, that person is self-exalted, that person is self-righteous!

Paul spoke pointedly about Israel's failure. He felt for his countrymen. He knew their difficulty, because their condition was his own condition prior to his conversion. His desire for their salvation is reflected in his going to the Jews first, but also in praying to God on their behalf. His preaching was in earnest, but it alone could not, and did not, convert anyone. God must call us.

It is a paradox that Israel's zeal for God constituted their greatest barrier. That barrier is mentioned here in Romans 10. Paul spoke with first hand knowledge of this barrier, because his zeal on behalf of Judaism had been notorious.

That zeal so preoccupied him, that he felt bound to consider Jesus and His followers traitors to the faith of their fathers. But he persecuted in ignorance. Many Christians "have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge." This is why doctrine is so important. If anyone tries to tell you that doctrine is not important you can immediately discount what they are about to say. It is not a sign of self-righteousness if you have the discernment to recognize error. The problem of self-righteousness comes in the attitude that is given back to them.

Romans 10:1-2 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

So here Paul is saying that Israel has a zeal for God, but they are lacking in knowledge. The descendants of Israel have ignored the righteousness that comes from God and in trying to establish their own righteousness, they have refused submission to God's righteousness.

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Romans 10:3-4 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

The statement "Christ is the end of the law", rather than the Protestant version that Christ brought an end to the law, fits in with the teaching of Paul about the law as the teacher to bring people to Christ.

Galatians 3:24-25 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

The law is righteousness in its requirements, but the Jews were incomplete in their efforts, because it entailed an endeavor to establish righteousness by human effort rather than by acceptance of a divine gift. Converted members of God's church have a divine gift of righteousness, and those who are self-righteous have given themselves that gift, so to speak. They have not received that gift from God. Self-righteousness is a dissatisfaction of the inadequacy of another human being to live up to the requirements of the law, when we ourselves believe that we are fulfilling the law.

Romans 10:5 For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them."

The attempt of the Jews to achieve a standard in righteousness was related to finding satisfaction in their imagined success of meeting the demands of the law of Moses. Paul is able to analyze their trouble with experience, because he has "been there, done that," as the modern expression goes.

Before his conversion, Paul's misdirected zeal, based entirely on the law, was self-righteous, because it was a replacement of the righteousness that comes from God and requires true faith.

Philippians 3:7-9 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in

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Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

Israel's covenant relation to God and reliance on law keeping (although essentially important) does not earn salvation. For this reason, in Romans 10:4 Paul pointed to Christ and His righteousness as Israel's great need.

The proof that Israel was out of line with respect to the will of God to the extent of rebelling against Him lies in the fact that, when He sent His Son as the Bringer of a salvation in full accord with the divine righteousness, the nation rejected Him.

Self-righteousness competes with true righteousness. Paul, in all his writings, contrasts the righteousness that is God's gift to men of faith in Jesus Christ with righteousness that is "of the law" and "in the flesh." By "in the flesh" he means formal conformity to legal requirements in the strength of worldly human nature. He is careful to maintain that the Law is never properly kept by one's own power or accord.

On the other hand, in full agreement with Jesus, Paul looks to genuine righteousness in living as the demand and achievement of salvation based on faith. God's gift consists of showing us how to properly apply righteousness, knowledge and wisdom.

Self-righteousness then, directly conflicts with true righteousness, and it finds its strength in human reasoning. Godly righteousness finds its strength in Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. Although we have a part to play in "living by every word of God," all things in our lives, including righteousness, are gifts from God.

Ephesians 2:8-10 For by 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. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

In his writings, Paul contrasts righteousness—that is God's gift to people 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

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righteousness, He defines righteous action. In contrast, self-righteousness is a rejection of God, who is the zenith of 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 will unify us in the church and in God's Kingdom! It has a direct bearing on the unity of the Church of God.

Self-righteousness is idolatry, because it is an attitude of superiority to what God has instructed us to do or not do. It places us, as individuals, in the unauthorized position of "divine judge of our equals". In committing this sin, we place ourselves, in our own minds, in God's position of authority.

Let us look at I Corinthians 10 in a different light than we are used to looking at it.

II Corinthians 10:12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

What a direct warning that is. He who supposes himself to be firm in the knowledge of God's truth; that regards himself as secure and steadfast, can very easily rely on his own mental strength and human reasoning.

We have to be careful not to fall into this sin of idolatry, or any other form of iniquity. Paul's comment warns us that a confidence in our own defense is not evidence that we are safe. In fact, such confidence may be one of the strongest evidences that we are in danger.

In reality, the ones who are most spiritually safe feel that they are weak and inadequate in and of themselves to resist Satan, the world, and their own human nature, and who recognize their need of God's help and strength. It is only when we rely on the true source of divine strength that we are truly secure.

II Corinthians 1:9 "Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead"

It is especially important that we be admonished on a regular basis of the danger of this illusive pitfall of self-righteousness. We are all in danger of falling into this sin. We

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should keep in mind that Paul's emphasis is that we are favored by God as members of His Church, and we have special intimate access to God, therefore we are a high priority in Satan's mind. He has no better tool than to encourage us to be self-righteous, the hidden secret sin. He wants to trip us up, and there is no more subtle way than for him to encourage us to feel superior to others in God's Church. It was his self-righteous attitude that caused him to rebel against God, because he felt superior to the two members of the Family of God. Now the Family of God consists of thousands of embryonic members. To allow ourselves to think that we are spiritually superior to another member is a sin of satanic proportions. It is that serious!

I Corinthians 10:13-14 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Self-righteousness is idolatry!

Paul exhorted the Corinthians to escape from everything that would have a tendency to lead them into the sin of idolatry. This includes the attitude of believing that as an individual we are far too "intelligent" or "so far superior" to others that we do not commit sin. The person with this type of attitude usually unknowingly commends himself and looks down on others for their shortcomings. But it is God's commendation we must seek.

II Corinthians 10:17-18 But "he who glories, let him glory in the LORD." For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.

Paul told the Corinthians that God was faithful, but that they also had to put forth effort. He therefore exhorts them to flee from all attitudes and customs that would have a tendency to lead them into idolatrous practices.

It takes conscious effort and hard work to guard against the idolatrous sin of self-righteousness.

The prideful sin of self-righteousness is probably the single greatest detriment to humility. May God give us the discernment to recognize any self-righteousness in us, and the spiritual strength to overcome this secret sin.