

“HOW TO AVOID SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS”

I. Introduction

- A. If you were to ask a random sampling of people what character qualities they would most like to be known for, I am pretty sure that nobody would say that they would like to be known as self-righteous and judgmental.
1. Yet that is exactly what every one of us is by nature.
 2. Deep down, in one way or another, we all think that we are better than others.
 3. As John Calvin puts it, “each one of us seems to himself to have just cause to be proud of himself and to despise all others in comparison... there is no one who does not cherish within himself some opinion of his own pre-eminence.” [*Institutes* 3.7.4]
 4. Secularists are quick to accuse Christians of being self-righteous, but they are generally blind to their own self-righteousness.
 5. One of the places where self-righteousness is so evident today is in the phenomenon of virtue-signaling.
 6. A person posts a statement on his Facebook page either denouncing something or expressing support for something.
 7. Whenever people do this, they are condemning others and declaring that they are in conformity with the culture’s prevailing view of what counts as righteousness.
- B. Self-righteousness is bound up with fallen mankind’s unceasing attempts at self-justification.
1. This means there is only one cure for self-righteousness.

2. We have to come to the point where we see that we have no intrinsic righteousness of our own and that our only hope is the extrinsic righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.
3. Only when we have reached that point can we begin to make headway in the lifelong battle against self-righteousness.
4. In these verses, Jesus instructs those who trust in him for extrinsic righteousness how to put our self-righteousness to death.

II. Judge Rightly

- A. As I noted in last Sunday's sermon, the first part of verse 37 is one of the most misquoted and misapplied verses in the entire Bible.
 1. There are all sorts of situations where people wrongly appeal to the words, "Judge not, and you will not be judged".
 2. Imagine a situation where a young man who is a member of a church decides to move into an apartment with his girlfriend.
 3. When some of the members of the church express their concerns about this, others might respond by saying, 'Well, you know, Jesus did say that we ought not to judge others.'
 4. That is not at all what Jesus means here.
 5. He is not saying that we should never make moral assessments about people's behavior.
 6. He is not saying that Christians who violate God's law should not be confronted and corrected.
 7. That would stand in direct conflict with the many passages of Scripture that instruct Christians to pursue holiness and to hold other believers accountable to God's Word.

8. To refuse to confront sin is to ignore the righteous standard that God sets forth in his law.
- B. Jesus's point in this text is not that we should not judge at all but that we should judge rightly.
1. The way to judge rightly is to remember that God is the only Lawgiver and Judge.
 2. We are not to judge other people's actions by our personal standards but by God's standard.
 3. Strictly speaking, we should never judge, but we should declare the judgments that God makes in his Word.
 4. And the fact that God's holy law is the standard by which all actions are judged means that we should never evaluate other people's behavior with a sense of superiority.
 5. On the contrary, we should do so with the humble acknowledgement that we too fall woefully short of God's righteous standard.
 6. We may not have the exact same failings as others, but we certainly have our own failings.
 7. This should make us charitable, humble, and gentle whenever we have to call other people's sin what it is.
- C. Another aspect of judging rightly is that we should not rush to make judgments.
1. Don't be quick to take offense.
 2. Don't assume the worst before you get all the facts.
 3. Don't presume to know a person's motives.

4. Take time to understand the situation before you form a definite opinion about it.
5. And even when it becomes clear that the person has done something wrong, deal with them in as charitable a manner as you can.
6. The patience that God extends to you should cause you to be patient in your dealings with others.

III. Forgive and Give

- A. The next thing that Jesus says in our text is that we should extend forgiveness to those who offend us.
 1. The fact that God has forgiven us should make us eager to forgive others.
 2. We are reminded of this every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, where we ask God to "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."
 3. As Jesus showed in his parable of the unmerciful servant, the person who refuses to forgive other people when they sin against him has not truly understood the grace that God shows to those who trust in Christ.
- B. Having said this, we do need to make an important distinction when it comes to forgiveness.
 1. While we should always have an attitude of forgiveness, we cannot actually grant forgiveness until the person who has offended us seeks our forgiveness.
 2. In other words, there is a sense in which forgiveness is unconditional and there is another sense in which it is conditional.
 3. Having a forgiving attitude towards others is unconditional.

4. Even when the person who has sinned against you shows no remorse, you are not to let yourself harbor bitterness and resentment and vengefulness in your heart.
 5. You should always be ready to forgive.
 6. That is the unconditional aspect of forgiveness.
- C. At the same time, the actual granting of forgiveness is conditional.
1. That is, we can only forgive those who admit that they have wronged us, those who ask for our forgiveness.
 2. After all, not even God forgives people unconditionally.
 3. God only forgives those who repent of their sins and place their trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation.
 4. Of course, God is the one who works faith and repentance in our hearts, but those conditions do need to be met in order for forgiveness to be granted.
 5. What holds true in man's relationship with God also holds true in human relationships.
 6. The only people who can be forgiven are those who seek forgiveness.
- D. Jesus also says that we are to give to others.
1. In other words, we should not approach our relationships with the focus on what we can get out of them.
 2. Instead, we should give selflessly to others, even when they don't deserve our kindness and generosity.
 3. God is kind and generous to those who are undeserving, and we should be too.

4. And God promises us that, even though our generosity to others may at times be unappreciated, he will ensure that it receives a generous reward.
5. Jesus illustrates this by using an example that would have been well-known in the Middle Eastern world, the example of a merchant measuring out grain to a customer.
6. One scholar explains the process as follows: "The measuring of corn is a process which is carried out according to an established pattern. The seller crouches on the ground with the measure between his legs. First of all he fills the measure three-quarters full and gives it a good shake with a rotary motion to make the grains settle down. Then he fills the measure to the top and gives it another shake. Next he presses the corn together strongly with both hands. Finally he heaps it into a cone, tapping it carefully to press the grains together... In this way, the purchaser is guaranteed an absolutely full measure; it cannot hold more." [Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 222]
7. That is what God promises you when you are charitable and generous in your dealings with others.
8. God will show the same charity and generosity to you.

IV. Examine Yourself

- A. In the last part of our passage, Jesus speaks of the role of self-examination in combatting self-righteousness.
 1. He makes this point by using a humorous illustration.
 2. Jesus says that if you want to help your neighbor get a speck out of his eye, you are not going to be any help to him until you deal with the log that is sticking out of your own eye.
 3. You can imagine how funny this scene would look.

4. That is precisely Jesus's point.
 5. He is saying that it is absurd for us to think that we can profitably point out other people's sins if we are unaware of our own sins or if we are downplaying our sins.
 6. That would be like a blind person attempting to help someone who lost his reading glasses cross a busy street.
 7. In Jesus's words, it is hypocrisy.
- B. Here Jesus shows himself to be the Great Physician.
1. He understands our hearts so well.
 2. He gives a perfect diagnosis.
 3. And in doing so, he exposes how skewed our perspective is.
 4. We have a tendency to minimize our own faults and to make much of the faults of others.
 5. We think that the log in our eye is really just a speck, and that the speck in our brother's eye is really a log.
 6. Jesus corrects that false perception by reversing it.
 7. We should be far more troubled by our own sins than we are by the sins of others.
 8. When we see the log in our own eye for what it is, we will be grateful to God for being so gracious to us.
 9. And our gratitude to God will enable us to be gracious and charitable in our dealings with others.
- C. Notice, however, that Jesus does not tell us to ignore the speck in our brother's eye.

1. On the contrary, he tells us to go to our brother when he sins and to correct him in gentleness and humility.
 2. In doing this, our focus should be on the edification and well-being of our brother.
 3. Because we love him, we don't want him to be plagued by that speck that is in his eye.
 4. We want him to be able to see clearly.
- D. Of course, even when we approach such situations in a gentle and humble manner, we may not always be well-received.
1. The person who confronts a brother for his sin is like a physician who administers a treatment to a sick patient.
 2. Sometimes the treatment that we need is unpleasant, and we would rather just skip it.
 3. But that doesn't mean the doctor should not treat us.
 4. Neither should we fail to do what we can to help our brother get the speck out of his eye.

V. Conclusion

- A. We could sum up this passage by saying that it teaches that the way to combat self-righteousness is to grow in meekness.
- B. Meekness is not weakness.
- C. Meekness is having a true view of yourself and being humbled by what you see.
- D. The meek person is someone who strives to deal with others in a manner that is shaped by who he knows himself to be before God.

- E. John Calvin explains this well in the opening section of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where he reflects upon the inextricable relationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self.
- F. Calvin writes, "As long as we do not look beyond the earth, being quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, we flatter ourselves most sweetly, and fancy ourselves all but demigods. Suppose we but once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and to ponder his nature, and how completely perfect are his righteousness, wisdom, and power -- the straight-edge to which we must be shaped. Then, what masquerading earlier as righteousness was pleasing in us will soon grow filthy in its consummate wickedness... man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty." [*Institutes*, 1.1.2-3]
- G. This is what undergirds the teaching that Jesus gives in this passage.
- H. The way to avoid self-righteousness in our dealings with others is to be ever mindful of who we are in relation to God.