

Self-Righteousness vs. Being Overtaken in a Fault

(Distinguishing Between the Sins; Distinguishing Between Our Responses to the Sins)

by Ward Fenley

As Christians our lives are essentially in two phases: the phase of self-righteousness and self-serving; then the phase of Christ's righteousness and Christ-serving. Many of us have grown up in religious environments. The vast majority of religious environments have as their foundation for fellowship moral obedience. In religious environments such as Catholicism and Christianity, this is still true. Within Christian circles Christ is named, but moral obedience is predominately emphasized. Is moral obedience wrong? No, but when moral obedience is emphasized to the diminution of the cross, it is at that point we must examine the Christianity of the movement or religion.

At New Creation Ministries International (NCMI), we believe that the person, mercy, and cross of Christ are the elements to be emphasized in ecclesiastical as well as non-ecclesiastical settings. That is, when the topic of Christ comes up in either situation, those three elements must be the basis of any pursuit of theology, debate, and discussions of morality and practice. The ministry of NCMI has been appreciated since its inception for its emphasis on these elements. The partners in NCMI continue to be devoted to these standards of Christian excellence. "God forbid that I should glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," is what Paul announced. It was his way of saying that no action of his moral obedience will ever be worthy of recognition in relation to eternal life. In fact, because of the praise of moral obedience in his former life as a Pharisee, upon his forsaking self-righteousness and embracing the righteousness (cross) of Christ, he rightly referred to the former-self-righteousness as "dung":

Philippians 3:3-10 For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. (4) Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: (5) Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; (6) Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. (7) But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. (8) Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, (9) And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: (10) That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;

Paul teaches that only the person who completely denies the significance of self-righteousness knows Christ and the power of His resurrection. That is, only the person who glories solely in the cross has eternal life. It is the emphasis that laces the epistles of Paul. This theme runs through every one of his letters. It is the quintessential Christianity. There is no other Christianity. For, "no flesh shall glory in His presence." When the person who names the name of Christ makes deeds

necessary for eternal life, they have nullified the cross and Christ profits them nothing:

Galatians 5:1-4 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. (2) Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. (3) For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. (4) Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

Christ never profited this person who names Christ yet trusts in works to keep or prove Christianity. They have indeed fallen from grace. Some assume this is a loss of eternal life of a person who once had it. Quite the contrary! Christ *never* profited that person. They learned the name of Jesus. They were taught moral obedience. They may have even been taught that Jesus died on the cross for sin. The Galatians were taught this as well, yet within their congregation there were some, deceived by the Judaizers, who believed that it was their works which could keep them in the faith.

There is a subtle form of this which has existed for years. The Galatian heresy to us may seem so obvious. After all, salvation is by Christ plus nothing. The subtle heresy of today is very similar, yet deceptively different. It is the teaching that moral obedience "proves" our eternal life. Those who teach this won't overtly state that their moral obedience saves them, but that it merely "proves" they are in Christ. Consequently, this breeds a contest of sorts within so-called Christian circles to see who is actually a Christian and who isn't. It creates the same spirit of the Pharisees, who were continually comparing themselves to one another, using the weaknesses of others to build up their appearance. However, this spirit sadly falls radically short of true Christianity. Many in religious circles are afraid to even be seen with "sinners" for fear of "appearing" wicked. They will use the phrase, "avoid the appearance of evil" to justify their self-righteousness. I know a man who had his picture taken with several who were drinking beer, Christian brothers, no less. This man went to great lengths to assure people that *he* was not drinking, so his reputation would not be impugned by the appearance that he was.

In pursuing the emphasis of the cross, NCMI, on occasion, is accused of catering to the immoral since moral obedience is not the emphasis in NCMI's teaching. Obviously this is not only a false accusation, it is an illogical one. It is illogical to assume an organization caters to immorality simply because moral obedience is not the emphasis of the organization. Furthermore, we steadfastly proclaim immorality as unhealthy and disobedient. However, we also understand that great believers throughout the history of God's people struggled with immorality. Jesus came from a long line of those who struggled with immorality. Daniel prayed:

Daniel 9:20 And whiles I was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the LORD my God for the holy mountain of my God;

Aaron said:

Numbers 12:11 And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not

the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned.

And of course David:

Psalms 51:4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Even Peter was ashamed to admit that he was a follower of Christ. Yet all these great men of faith were believers in the living God. They experienced these things to show us that God's people have weaknesses. They also experienced these things to show us that God's people needed mercy from God and from others.

This raises a nagging question: Why is it that Jesus had mercy on some but not on others? And of course a related question: Is there ever a time where we are to make a distinction? Jesus clearly did. To the woman caught in adultery He said, "Neither do I accuse you. Go and sin no more." To the man sick of the palsy He said: "Your sins are forgiven." To Zacchaeus, Jesus pronounced, "Today salvation has come to your house." Paul seemed equally compassionate when he commands:

Galatians 6:1-4 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. (2) Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. (3) For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. (4) But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another.

Paul teaches us that brothers are sometimes overtaken. For the believer who claims to be a spiritual person Paul says, "You who are spiritual restore such a one." But Paul doesn't just say "restore" them. He says "restore them with a spirit of meekness." In other words, restore them gently. What does "restore" mean? It means to bring them back to where they were, which is a place of assurance and enjoyment of eternal life. When we are overtaken, the last thing we need is someone kicking us. In fact, it is this type of restoration which Paul says is a work to prove oneself: "But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another." In other words, through restoring others we prove ourselves. Through restoring the weak we prove ourselves to ourselves and have rejoicing in ourselves. That is the command or "royal law of Christ." No moral command is ever given the title "the royal law of Christ." Why? Because moral commands cannot prove our work. Only love and restoration prove our work. So Paul encourages restoration. He displays the same compassion Christ displayed and tells us to do the same.

But then we see a different response to a different type of disobedience:

Matthew 23:13-36 But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. (14) Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. (15) Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when

he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. (16) Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! (17) Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? (18) And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. (19) Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? (20) Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. (21) And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. (22) And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. (23) Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. (24) Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. (25) Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. (26) Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. (27) Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. (28) Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (29) Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, (30) And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. (31) Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. (32) Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. (33) Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? (34) Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: (35) That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. (36) Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

How seemingly antithetical to the response of Christ toward those who had fallen into sin! If I were to happen upon Jesus on the day he encountered the adulterous woman and then encountered him on the day He encountered the Pharisees, I might think I was dealing with a schizophrenic. But upon an examination of the specific sin of these Pharisees and Paul's elucidation of the same sin and his corresponding response, it is evident that a serious distinction must be made between the typical moral faults of believers versus the self-righteousness of those who draw near to God with their lips. In every case of the pardons Jesus gave, there was always an admission of weakness, whether it was spiritual weakness or physical weakness. There was always humility. Granted, even though out of the ten lepers only one returned, yet they all admitted they needed physical healing. But only one returned to give thanks. The point is, they all confessed the need of healing. Even to the Pharisees Jesus said:

Matthew 9:11-13 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why

eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? (12) But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. (13) But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Jesus here seemed to equate mercy with the need of healing. In other words, when moral weaknesses arise, mercy is needed, and "blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Jesus doesn't heal the self-righteous. He heals those who have need of a physician. That is, those who *admit* their need receive healing. And it is upon those Jesus has mercy. But Jesus was merciless to the self-righteous. It is evident that Jesus made the distinction between self-righteousness and moral transgression. Jesus chided the self-righteous:

Matthew 15:7-9 Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, (8) This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. (9) But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

To claim the name of Jesus and yet maintain a spirit of self-righteous can only yield the response of woe and reprimand. In the passage in Matthew 23 Jesus cited certain characteristics of the self-righteous. Here are just a few:

They love to be noticed for their long and false prayers (v. 14)

They are concerned with things rather than God (vv. 16-17)

They are concerned with what they give instead of having mercy (v. 23)

They nitpick about the smallest things, and yet swallow camels (have no mercy) (v. 24)

They are concerned with their outward appearance (making sure no one sees them with those who drink beer), yet are spiritually dead inside (v. 26-27)

They appear righteous outward but have inner hypocrisy (v. 28)

They said they would never have participated in the sins of others (v. 30)

It is this obsession with outward appearance yet inward hypocrisy that Christ denounced as an abomination:

Luke 16:15 And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

As a Bible teacher I have opportunities to teach others about the Gospel and kingdom of Christ. Because this issue is significant in Christ's teaching and Paul's teaching, I believe we should all make it a part of our teaching. A part of the Gospel is teaching others to admit weakness and to seek out believers who are like-minded. I often try to be vulnerable without making others feel too uncomfortable. I once

shared an area of vulnerability at a conference and one man responded that he would never do such a thing and doesn't see how a Christian could ever do such a thing. It was this same man who desperately wanted others to know that just because he was in a picture with men drinking beer did not mean that he was drinking beer. Beyond this, this man continues to attack God's people and nitpick their moral weaknesses. So, as a Christian who believes in displaying mercy as Christ displayed it, how do we respond to such a spirit? It is the spirit of self-righteousness to be sure. This spirit certainly has all the fruits of those railed upon by Christ throughout the Gospels. How do we respond? Is Christ's response solely reserved for Him toward this anti-Christian spirit? Paul wrote concerning the self-righteous:

Galatians 5:2-9 Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. (3) For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. (4) Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. (5) For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. (6) For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love. (7) Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? (8) This persuasion *cometh* not of him that calleth you. (9) A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

Again in 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 11:12-15 But what I do, that I will do, that I may cut off occasion from them which desire occasion; that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we. (13) For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. (14) And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. (15) Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.

Paul clearly speaks out against the self-righteous. So Paul, like his Master, is not afraid to deal with this specific type of sin. Paul deals with self-righteousness the way self-righteousness needs to be addressed throughout eternity. This does not mean that we lose our temper while proclaiming the danger and fruits of self-righteousness. But it certainly does not mean we trivialize self-righteousness or overlook it. We must deal with self-righteousness and warn of its dangers. The self-righteous seek to bite and devour God's people. But as God's people we are called to protect one another from the self-righteous. That is, we seek to rescue them from the mouths of the wicked:

Proverbs 12:5-7 The thoughts of the righteous are right: but the counsels of the wicked are deceit. (6) The words of the wicked are to lie in wait for blood: but the mouth of the upright shall deliver them. (7) The wicked are overthrown, and are not: but the house of the righteous shall stand.

Notice that it says we deliver God's people with our words. That is, we speak to those whom the self-righteous accuse with the words of comfort and the cheer of the good news of Christ and Him crucified. It is through these comforting words that the house of the righteous (those cleansed by the blood of the cross) continues to stand.

The house of the righteous is the house of God, comprised of all believers; believers whose consciences have been cleansed. But the self-righteous try to accuse the brethren. They lie in wait for blood. In other words, they try to bring the believer into bondage through accusation. But Paul tells us to stand fast against the Galatian heresy:

Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

There are times when we must confront what has created such great stumbling among believers, and that is the spirit of self-righteousness. It is never to be treated lightly. It is to be spoken of as evil and pronounced as the lie of the adversary. It is ever so subtle, considering the fact that it strikes under the banner of the name of Jesus. But how blasphemous it is when the name of Jesus (Yahweh is our Salvation) is used by the self-righteous. The name of Jesus must only be named as our own within the context of admiration for His mercy and our admission of the fact that only His cross brings deliverance. We have heard of the well-known passage:

Galatians 6:7 Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

Traditionally this passage has been taught under the heresy of self-righteousness. That is, teachers have interpreted this verse to be referring to moral weakness. This teaching is the teaching of the adversary. That is how subtle the modern day Galatian heresy is. It names the name of Jesus and isolates a verse from its context to make it mean something entirely opposite. When the context is carefully analyzed, we see that "sowing to the flesh" is within the same context as the text dealing with restoring a brother after a fall:

Galatians 6:1-16 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. (2) Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. (3) For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. (4) But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. (5) For every man shall bear his own burden. (6) Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things. (7) Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. (8) For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. (9) And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. (10) As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. (11) Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand. (12) As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. (13) For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh. (14) But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. (15) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. (16) And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the

Israel of God.

It is those who do not restore who are the ones who sow to the flesh. They desire to show off the flesh (i.e. their good deeds). They want to draw us to their way of thinking (comparing and making sure the outward appearance tells others of our spiritual status). Outwardly they make a show of the flesh but inwardly they break all laws, for their hearts are covetous.

The ministry of NCMI is committed to standing for the glory of the cross and standing against self-righteousness. Though we may be accused of catering to immorality, the true immorality of Scripture is self-righteousness. Our hope is that we can focus on the positive aspects of the cross and the love of God for His people. But there are also times when we must be willing to speak out against self-righteousness. Make no mistake: self-righteousness is evil and God certainly has a purpose in contrasting His grace with that evil. But it is through teaching others the Gospel that the opportunity, yea, privilege, is granted to show that contrast. It's not comfortable to speak out against the self-righteous. It doesn't feel good. It's much more pleasant to speak about the wonders of the cross and kingdom of God. And we desire to pursue those aspects of our faith. However, we also realize that there is a time for all things. And we must feel free and honored to rise to the occasion of helping our brothers and sisters when the accusers mount attacks against them. We must make distinctions between moral failure and self-righteousness. There is a great difference between them, and the two deserve completely different responses, regardless of whether the one holding to self-righteousness names the name of Jesus. The heretics in Galatia were naming the name of Jesus. But what is true heresy, and is it ever proper to identify a doctrine as heresy or a person as a heretic? Paul says this:

Titus 3:10-11 A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; (11) Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.

Paul uses the word "heretic" (or "heretick"; KJV) to describe the one who must be avoided. Strong's Concordance defines it as a "schismatic person", that is, one who divides. Those who bring self-righteousness divide because they bring in a doctrine of comparison. When we compare there is division. Exclusion begins. We begin looking at the outward and making distinctions of who is good and bad based upon outward performance rather than on whether the person restores or not. Moral weaknesses among believers are followed by a spirit of humility on behalf of the one who has fallen and a spirit of restoration on behalf of the one who is privy to the information. Gossip is never an option. True unity is accomplished through love, which is the hiding (or covering) of one's faults:

Proverbs 10:11-12 The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked. (12) Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.

Notice the contrast: Hatred causes strife, or divides. What does love do? It doesn't gossip. It keeps it to oneself. It hides it. It restores the one who falls.

Because there is such a distinction in Scripture between moral fault and self-

righteousness, our response must be different as well. We at NCFMI desire to restore those who have fallen, as we ourselves will fall at times as well and we will need restoration. But we do not believe that the self-righteous are to be restored. There is no restoration for the one who continues in self-righteousness. The Pharisees were destroyed for their self-righteousness at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and the self-righteous of today will likewise be destroyed. However, it is also our desire to see the self-righteous broken and contrite in spirit so that they too might experience [*times of refreshing*](#) from the presence of the Lord. Therefore we continue to teach and apply the Gospel as much as we understand it to both those in need of restoration and those who are consumed with self-righteousness.