

## Righteousness

**“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you shall in no way enter the Kingdom of heaven”**  
(Matthew 5:20).

**“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’”**  
(Galatians 5:13-14).

**“In humility, consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others”** (Philippians 2:4).

**“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others”** (1 Corinthians 10:24).

The recent “protests” on college and university campuses got me thinking, Such selfishness! Our young people think that they’re the most important entity in the whole world and others who might be inconvenienced by their acts, well . . . tough. Too bad for anybody else. Some 7 or 8% of each student body gleefully disrupted for weeks the education of the 90+% who refused to participate. The issue was framed in the media as “freedom of speech.” Nonsense. We narcissistic Americans don’t understand any more that freedom of speech or, indeed, *any* political freedom, is a privilege that necessarily carries the responsibility to respect others and not cause offenses or harm. Responsibilities *always* accompany privileges. But, alas, that basic moral concept is rapidly vanishing from planet earth. The core characteristic of freedom-loving Americans, individualism, is becoming surpassing selfishness.

We were created with consciousness, with self-awareness. We are an embodied soul, and that identifies us as self and not as someone else. But with that comes the command to care for others, as if we’re all members of an extended family. It was God’s creational intent that humanity should reflect the Trinity, three differentiated Persons who are as One in love, peace and joy. Loving God is therefore necessarily and inextricably linked to loving others.

We are not one bee in a swarm of bees, or an ant in an ant colony. Marxists want us to be like the animals and insects, that is, to deny ourselves as individuals and identify only as an expendable component of society. They believe (it’s a corollary of Darwinism), that we’re by nature supposed to be a corporate entity, willing to sacrifice self for the sake of the whole. (And Marxist leaders will make sure that some are sacrificed!) Marxist ideology repudiates God’s creation ideal. But to affirm individualism must, absolutely *must*, also acknowledge our responsibilities to others. Failure to do that repudiates God’s creation ideal as surely as does Marxism. Being responsible to others is righteousness.

The reason for this Sunday school lesson is, the Western world’s obsession with personal freedoms and rights is heavy in the Church too. We Christians suppose we’re free to live as we please, just so we believe in Jesus. We suppose that, as Americans, we have the right to enjoy all that our society places on offer. We’re individualists with a passion for self. Just like our neighbors, we suppose that life is to pursue personal happiness. We need to understand righteousness.

God is holy, wise and just. And good. Out of His infinitely perfect Person flows righteousness. Because of the entry of sin, God had to reveal to us what righteousness is; it’s one of the reasons for Scripture. There is a revealed standard, to which we’re held without excuse. The “natural” man, that is the unsaved person, cannot be righteous; it’s impossible. His sin nature compels him to sin. But a follower of Jesus has the indwelling Holy Spirit to enable righteousness. Yes, Jesus’ righteousness is imputed to the believer as the essential element of justification, but that doesn’t obviate the necessity of our actually being righteous in this life. Our righteousness expresses the life of Christ within us. A synergy is involved: The Spirit empowers us, but we need to know what righteousness is from the Word of God, and obey it. The follower of Jesus needs to deny self, consider himself dead to sin and to the world, and live the resurrected life of Christ loving God and others.

What does it mean, “to deny self”? It means stopping being self-absorbed and self-indulgent. It means being, instead, like Jesus, who willingly set aside His rights and prerogatives to serve others. He willingly sacrificed Himself, out of love giving generously of Himself so that others are helped and blessed. We too can set aside our rights and freedoms, if we want to, in order to minister love to others. That’s righteousness.

Selfishness and righteousness are opposites; we're either pursuing one or the other. People who are proud (and maybe self-righteous) can't stop being selfish. People who love comforts and security and happiness cannot stop being selfish. People critical of others or indifferent to others cannot stop being selfish. Such people as these may do some things that are right and good (as do unbelievers), but they cannot be righteous. Righteousness is godliness is Christ-likeness. Righteousness is a way of life, it's "walking with God," it's following Jesus. It's being a "servant" of God, it's "bearing fruit," it's "discipleship," it's "putting on the new man" in Christ.

Attending a "worship" service on Sunday mornings doesn't substitute for being righteous. Jesus said that those who belong to Him "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). John said that practicing righteousness indicates who is a child of God, i.e., is saved (1 John 3:10). James (Chapter 2) said that it's our righteousness that reveals who has true, saving faith, as opposed to mere intellectual assent. Paul commands us to pursue righteousness (1 Timothy 6:11) and to know Scripture in order to be "trained in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Peter wrote that Christ died for us so that we would "die to sin and live for righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24). None of these verses refers to imputed righteousness, but to our actually living a life in obedience to God's revealed will.

Something else: Practicing righteousness defeats evil, it's how we participate in God's cosmic conflict with evil. It shows we're on the side of good. Failure to live the righteous life for whatever reason expresses hatred for others; it means we're really on the side of Satan, the side of evil, in that cosmic moral conflict. There's no neutral or middle position.

A terrible disconnect is evident in modern American evangelicalism. It's this, We suppose that all we need to do, at some point in life, is make a decision for Christ and . . . that's all! We're set for life. Our "Christianity" is like an insurance policy, a contract. We do "this," and God is obligated to do "that." Once "this" is done, we can put the contract away in a drawer; we take it out if and when needed but otherwise we're free to live as we want to. We may fill our minds with good and helpful information about the Bible thru personal study or attending church but, somehow, the Bible is there and we're here. The Bible's words don't affect us. God doesn't really have authority over us; we're our own authorities. If challenged, well, hey, we're "saved, born again and on our way to heaven."

So that the assurance we think we have isn't a delusion, we need to put an end to crass individualism and selfish desires, and pursue instead righteousness as it's described in Scripture. For example, gospel outreach, forgiving those who offend, showing mercy, interceding for those in need, sharing our wealth with the needy, helping others, encouraging and blessing others; in short, it's everything that God says we're to do with the life He's given us. Righteousness is how love for others is expressed in real life. Righteousness imitates God, and that glorifies God. Righteousness is more than just doing good things from time to time. It's a way of life, it's a character trait. It's how we *are*, how we live.

Righteousness is intentional. It requires active obedience, a will to do God's will. Or it doesn't happen. If we're in personal relationship with the risen, exalted Jesus, in love with Him and grateful to Him, we'll want to be like Him and do as He did, i.e., live righteously. The righteous life is also proleptic, that is, it expresses in the here and now how we'll be in the future glorified state. Righteousness is also how we express the image of God.

Here's the central issue. Righteousness is a creational obligation we all have to our Creator. By existing, we're obliged to honor a holy God with righteousness. But we cannot do it. No one can. No one even wants to. So, in love, God sent the Son into the world to fulfill this obligation on our behalf. Jesus did that, He lived the righteous life none of us could do, or would do. Jesus fully satisfied God's just demand for righteousness, making reconciliation of all humanity possible. Now, by our union with Jesus we escape God's dreadful indignation and instead enter into a love relationship with God. If we've availed ourselves of this salvation that God in grace offers, then we have a compelling, moral obligation to God to live that required righteous life. It's our responsibility as a son, and it's a responsibility deriving from God's love for us and our love for Him. Being in relationship with God necessarily means being in right relationship with all His other beloved human creatures. Love is as love does. We express our love for God by our love for others.

Conclusion: We've been called to participate in something radical, something demanding, something transcendent, following Christ. The Word of God defines it. The Spirit of the living Christ enables it. Whatever pleasures we may find in this life by ignoring our calling are meaningless compared to the supernal blessings and rewards that await us if, instead, we're faithful to our calling. If we love Jesus, let's do as He taught and commanded.