

Submit unto the righteousness of God

This article is from the "Among Friends" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of May 9-10, 2009.

By Dave Havir

BIG SANDY, Texas—Many people among the Churches of God have difficulty understanding the concept of self-righteousness.

- Some people believe self-righteousness is the name of one specific sin. Is that true?
- Some people believe self-righteousness is the worst sin. Is that true?
- Some people believe they personally are not self-righteous. Is that true?

Let's explore these concepts.

What is it?

Does the Bible speak of a specific sin called self-righteousness?

When a person understands what the concept of self-righteousness is, he understands that self-righteousness is much more than one specific sin.

Allow me to use Romans 10:3 to identify self-righteousness:

"For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God."

Self-righteousness is our own righteousness.

Self-righteousness is not one specific, narrow sin. It is a general approach to life.

Some people assume self-righteousness must be loud and flamboyant. However, it is just as likely to be quiet and restrained.

Paul warned saints against having "confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:4).

Before his conversion he had more "trust in the flesh" than many people (verses 4-6).

The worst?

Is self-righteousness the worst sin?

As we have seen, self-righteousness is not a narrowly focused way. It is a general approach.

Make no mistake about it. Self-righteousness is not the ultimate goal of a saint.

However, it is my perspective that some forms of self-righteousness are better than unrighteousness!

- Paul described God's displeasure with unrighteousness and noted that unrighteousness will not be in the Kingdom of God (Romans 1:26-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21).

- Unfortunately, self-righteousness (your own righteousness) can oftentimes degenerate into unrighteousness.

- However, self-righteousness (your own righteousness) is sometimes beneficial behavior.

In 1 Corinthians 13:3, Paul described the action of giving goods to feed the poor. There was nothing wrong with this action. The self-righteousness can be the reason or motivation behind doing the good behavior.

I prefer to have neighbors who give to people (even if for the wrong reasons) than neighbors who steal possessions or gossip about others in the neighborhood.

I prefer to have friends among the Churches of God who give to people (even if for the wrong reasons) than friends among the Churches of God who accuse, debate or backbite in the Church of God community.

You have it too

Are you one of those people who believe you personally do not have self-righteousness?

I've got news for you. You have it. Unless you are totally unrighteous, you have some self-righteousness.

If you have God's Spirit, you are a combination of God's righteousness and your own righteousness.

Let's learn from the apostle Paul.

Do you realize that Paul knew he was not inherently righteous? In Romans 3:10 he wrote: "There is none righteous, no, not one."

Do you realize that Paul did not consider himself righteous even after he received the Holy Spirit?

In Romans 7:14 he wrote: "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin."

Obviously Paul knew the value and power of the Holy Spirit. Yet Paul also knew he was still carnal. Paul knew that good actions do not automatically translate into God's righteousness.

More than good works

Jesus told His disciples that saints would be rewarded according to their good works (Matthew 16:27; 25:40).

However, God's righteousness is more than good works. What did Jesus say in Matthew 7:21-23 that righteousness is? It is:

- More than prophesying in Jesus's name.
- More than casting out demons in Jesus' name.
- More than doing many wonderful works in Jesus' name.

What did Paul say in 1 Corinthians 13:2-3 that righteousness is? It is:

- More than the gift of prophecy.
- More than understanding all mysteries and all knowledge.
- More than having faith to move mountains.
- More than giving goods to feed the poor.
- More than giving the body to be burned.

In Matthew 5:20 Jesus told His disciples: "Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Misguided zeal

Did you know your own righteousness is a product of misguided zeal? In Romans 10:2 Paul wrote: "For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge."

Let's notice some examples of misguided zeal.

- Consider Matthew 16:21-23. Peter was zealous to defend Jesus against the religious community that was going to kill Him. Peter's zeal did not reflect the will of God.
- Consider Luke 9:54-56. James and John were zealous to defend Jesus against the people who were not showing Him the proper respect. Their zeal did not reflect the will of God.
- Consider Matthew 23:5-12. Many Pharisees were zealous for recognition, prestige and titles.
- Consider Luke 11:37-39. Many Pharisees were zealous to take physical actions as a part of their religion.
- Consider John 8:33. Many Jews were zealous to place significance upon their heritage and their apparent special relationship with God.

Despising others

Jesus spoke a parable about a Pharisee and a publican to people with some problems (Luke 18:9-14). What were their problems?

In verse 9 Jesus “spoke this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.”

Our own righteousness often leads to a lack of love toward other people.

Who was justified?

- In the parable the Pharisee viewed himself as a righteous man. Unfortunately, that righteousness was his own righteousness. Self-righteousness led him to feel exalted. Self-righteousness caused him eventually to be abased.
- In the parable the publican knew he was a sinner—and he repented. God’s righteousness made him humble. God’s righteousness caused him to eventually be exalted.