

LESSON 11



EXCEPT YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS EXCEED

Scripture Texts: Isaiah 28:17; Matthew 5:20, 7:21; Romans 8:1; Philippians 3:8-9; Ephesians 4:11-24; 1 John 3:2-9

A doctrine held by those who do not believe in holiness is that all Christians sin more or less. In our lesson today we will study what the Scriptures have to say in regard to this doctrine. How much sin does God excuse? How much sin do the people of the world excuse?

The world's people have a standard by which they measure professing Christians. If they see one commit a questionable act, they are usually quick to doubt his profession. How much sin does God have power to cleanse from a person's life? What is His promise?

MEMORY VERSE: *"For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."*

Matthew 5:20

What God Calls Righteousness

In Isaiah 28:17 we see that perfect righteousness is required. This speaks of God's sharp eye for judging. He sees clearly, closely, and accurately. We cannot lie to Him. We cannot hide, for He sees and knows all. He requires perfection (Matthew 5:48).

Jesus spoke of the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 5:20. The scribes were students of the Law of Moses and Old Testament Scriptures. They were better at knowing than at obeying them. The Pharisees were strict keepers of the forms of the Law. They were sticklers for the letter of doctrine. They added details (traditions) that were supposed to make observance of forms more exact. In them, outward form crowded out inward purity.

Both the scribes and the Pharisees were self-righteous and hypocritical. Both had a habit of judging and condemning others. Therefore, Jesus said our righteousness must be of better quality than that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Theirs was outward. Ours must be both outward and inward, spiritual, sincere, complete, and holy or we will miss the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 7:21).

One can say "Lord, Lord," from his lips, and it avails nothing. When it comes from the heart, it means that one obeys Jesus as his Lord. Only those who DO the will of God will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Romans 8:1 tells us that there are some who have no condemnation. They are not guilty before God. This is a holy position. They reach it by being new creatures in Jesus Christ. They are led and taught by the Holy Spirit. They have crucified the flesh (Galatians 5:24; 6:14). This is not done in one's own human power (as the Pharisees obeyed forms). It is by the work of God in the heart.

In Philippians 3:8-9 we find that Paul had been trying to keep the Law and did (verses 4-6). This was his own righteousness, an attainment he earned by his own efforts. But when he saw God's righteousness and knew that he could have it not by working but by grace, he cast away his own as nothing to take God's by putting faith in Christ. This was righteousness of the heart, not of outward works.

By a person's own efforts, he can overcome some bad impulses and habits, but he cannot change these impulses into holy ones. If he succeeds in ordering his life after earthly standards of goodness, honesty, kindness, helpfulness, and generosity, these will never carry him into the Kingdom of Heaven. It will never serve as the wedding garment at the marriage of the Lamb. It is only righteousness that God accepts as the old song of Zion expresses: "When he

shall come with trumpet sound, Oh, may I then in him be found; Dressed in his righteousness alone, Faultless to stand before the throne."

Good works have a place in a Christian's life. ". . . they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works" (Titus 3:8). In other words, keep doing the works God has generated. If Heaven were to be earned, we could never do enough good works to earn an eternity of perfect joy. Jesus purchased the right and power for us to live holy. He purchased it with His own blood. He paid with His life. What remains for us to pay? The song is true that says, "Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe."

Reaching the Standard

In Ephesians 4:11-12 we see that Christ has given the church certain leaders or servants qualified by Him to teach and lead the saints to the state God has set for them, the state of perfection. This does not mean that we can ever know all, or that we will never make a mistake. It is not human perfection, but a perfect heart that God wants, perfect in motive, in purity, in love. How perfect? Unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. No higher standard could be set. The only way one can reach it is to have Christ within. Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13).

Ephesians 4:24 tells us we must put off the old man of sin and put on the new man. This is the spiritual transformation that changes one from a child of the devil to a child of God. As the inward life is changed, so is the outward conduct. God's children are trustworthy, honest, true, pure, kind, helpful, and loving. Their righteousness comes from God. It is His goodness living in human lives.

In 1 John 3:2-9 John was speaking of the hope of seeing God's appearing and seeing Him as He is. He brings the plain teaching that one makes himself as pure as Jesus, and as sinless as He. This is done by being born of God—the only way to be separated from sin. This is not the work of man by himself. His part is to submit to the work of God. When God does His part, the man ceases to sin. He does not sin because the seed of God lives in his heart. It is holiness. It is the life of God and the direct opposite of sin. God and sin cannot live in the same place at the same time.

This is the righteousness God requires. He not only requires it, but He provides it. Our part is to repent, put faith in Christ, yield ourselves all to Him through obedience to His Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. We provide the vessel. He provides the righteousness. Can there be any doubt that righteousness is necessary for us to please God?

Present Need

In these perilous times we hear that "Times have changed" and "We must have new methods, new standards; the old are outdated." This is not true. Christianity cannot succeed with shifting standards. We do have an absolute and changeless standard of right and wrong that does not change according to circumstances. "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3). "For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven" (Psalm 119:89). Who set the standard? Where do we find it? Who will finally judge our measuring to it?

In the midst of rapidly skidding moral conditions, blasphemies, mounting crime, drugs, sexual permissiveness, rebellion against authority, neglect of the Bible, failure of the home and of the nominal church, what can we do? We must hold up before our youth a standard of righteousness that works.

JUST A THOUGHT

"The tragedy of our day is not unanswered prayer but unoffered prayer."