

## WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS AND SIN

(Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

### A. RIGHTEOUSNESS

The word *righteous* means being right before others or – more importantly – right before God. The Amplified Bible expresses it *right standing with God*. The Pharisees, who so often clashed with Jesus over issues of what was right and wrong, were right in their own eyes but not in the eyes of God. They saw their outward acts, but God saw their hearts. That is why Jesus said that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>1</sup>

God Himself is righteous. Jesus addressed His Father as *Righteous Father*, He was keen to *fulfil all righteousness* and He claimed that His judgment was righteous.

It is clear throughout the Bible that God wants us to be righteous, but it is equally clear that, of ourselves, we are not. Jesus taught that:

**1. We should seek righteousness** (*read* Matt 5:6). The promise of the righteous being blessed was nothing new. Psalm 106:3, for example, says *Blessed (is) he who does righteousness at all times*, but Jesus took this further with addressing those who have a longing for righteousness, who will find it on earnest seeking and thereby receive its blessing. The place where the earnest seeker will find righteousness is in Jesus, as we shall see later.

**2. We need the righteousness of God** (*read* Matt 6:33). We cannot have a right standing with God on our own merit. Even if we were capable of living without sin from this moment on, there would still be our past sins to make us unworthy of standing before God. Our only hope is the righteousness that God imputes<sup>2</sup> to us, that is to say, God attributes to us the righteousness of His Son as if it were our own.\*

**3. The Holy Spirit brings conviction of** righteousness (*read* John 16:8-10). A sinner becomes convicted of his or her sin when the Holy Spirit reveals it to them. But along with revealing the weakness and failure in a sinner's life, the Holy Spirit reveals the righteousness of Jesus and the judgment awaiting all men.∅

**4. The righteous enter Eternal Life** (*read* Matt 25:31-40). Notice that here Jesus is referring to doing acts of righteousness. Having received imputed

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 5:20.

<sup>2</sup> To attribute or cred to.

\* More on this in the next Study under 'Salvation.'

∅ Students may benefit from reading Peter's Sermon on the Day of Pentecost, in Acts Chapter 2, in which Peter refers to the people's sin in crucifying Jesus, the righteousness of Jesus (*a man approved by God*) and judgment to come, and the people were *cut to the heart*.

righteousness from God, it is expected that believers should live lives that, in the words of John the Baptist, are *worthy of repentance*.<sup>3</sup>

Notice that here, as in all of Jesus' teaching, there are no grey areas between sin and righteousness. One is either righteous or evil and one's destination is either heaven or hell.

Activity 1: Which of the following are true?

- (a) God sees everyone as righteous, because He overlooks our faults.
- (b) Once God calls us righteous, it does not matter what we do.
- (c) We can be righteous in God's eyes but only because of Jesus.
- (d) The Holy Spirit convicts us that we are unrighteous.
- (e) It is pointless to seek righteousness as it is unobtainable.
- (f) Righteousness means being right in the sight of God.

## B. SIN

We saw in our previous Study that something important is missing from life which can be replaced only by our union with Jesus. The cause of this death of the spiritual life is *sin*. As the Apostle Paul expressed it, *the wages of sin is death*.<sup>4</sup> Since Jesus came to deal with our sin and its consequences, He had cause to speak of it often, not least because the Jewish religious leaders and teachers (notably the Scribes and Pharisees) seemed oblivious to the sin in their outwardly pious lives. Jesus needed to correct the inadequate understanding of sin held by these religious leaders and others who had been influenced by their teaching.

Basically, sin is rejecting God's way and taking our own. Another word to describe it might be *rebellion*. It started in the Garden of Eden, when our earliest ancestors were enticed by Satan's temptations to disobey God.<sup>5</sup> Every person, in every generation since then, has followed suit, except for Jesus Who chose the way of His Father without exception (*read* John 6:38 and Heb 4:15).

Since sin is a rejection of God's will, and Jesus came both to fulfil and to reveal God's will, rejecting Jesus is, itself, part of that sin (*read* Luke 10:16 and Luke 14:16-24).

**1. The Nature of Sin.** The Pharisees were meticulous in keeping every outward observance of the commandments that the Lord gave to the Hebrews through Moses. However, Jesus had more to say in disapproval of the Pharisees and the Jewish scribes than of the common people. He taught that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>6</sup> That is because, although outwardly they appeared righteous, the attitude of their hearts was impure (*read* Matt 23:28). The outward acts we often call sin are actually the outcome of what a man or woman is thinking and desiring in the heart (*read* Matt 15:18-19). This is why

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<sup>3</sup> Matt 3:8.

<sup>4</sup> Rom 6:23.

<sup>5</sup> The story of Adam and Eve and eating the forbidden fruit is well known. It is told in Genesis Chap 3.

<sup>6</sup> Matt 5:20.

Jesus was able to say, "*Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart,*"<sup>7</sup> for the uncontrolled desire of lust is as much sin as the act of adultery that might or might not arise from that lust.

Jesus did suggest there are degrees of sin (*read* Luke 12:47-48 & John 19:11). However, it is not for us to set a scale of little sins and big ones. The Pharisees and other contemporaries of Jesus' had their ideas of which sins were worse than others, but Jesus exposed sins which they thought insignificant, whilst appearing to be lenient (though not condoning) towards those who committed acts of sin which others considered to be of a high order. For example He spoke his most scathing words to the religious teachers and Pharisees for their hypocrisy: "*Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?*" yet He did not condemn the woman brought to him in adultery, whom her captors said should be stoned to death: "*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.*"<sup>8</sup>

One factor in determining how serious a sin might have been committed, might be whether a person has acted in ignorance or in wilful sin (*read* John 9:41 and John 15:22).

**2. Effects of Sin.** Those most affected by our sin are not ourselves, but God. It was because of our sins that Jesus, the Son of God, suffered a most painful death on the Cross. Inasmuch as sin affects the perpetrator, Jesus spoke of:

- (i) *Separation from God.* This was stated explicitly by Isaiah, but Jesus warned of the eternal separation from God of those who do not do His will (*read* Isaiah 59:2 and Matt7:21-23).
- (ii) *Bondage.* (*read* John 8:32-34). The Apostle Paul wrote of his experience of repeatedly doing the things he did not want to do, knowing them to be wrong. He saw the reason for his failure as the sin from which he was unable to free himself: "*But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.*"<sup>9</sup> This is the enslaving effect of sin. Without a deliverer, it is as if sin becomes our master, whose will we must obey. William Hendriksen describes this slavery. His description is worth quoting in full: "He is a slave, for he has been overcome and taken captive by his master, sin, and is unable to deliver himself from this bondage. He is as truly (nay, more truly) chained as is the prisoner with the iron band around his leg, the band that is fastened to a chain which is cemented into the wall of a dungeon. He cannot break the chain. On the contrary, every sin he commits draws it tighter, until at last it crushes him completely."<sup>10</sup>

**3. The course of sin.** If sin is not dealt with, it will lead to:

- (i) *Moral blindness* (*read* Matt 15:14). It is a sorry state of affairs when a sinner is unaware of his or her sin, as it was for the Pharisees, yet such is the case when one has persisted in sin until it has become so much a normal part of life

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<sup>7</sup> Matt 5:28.

<sup>8</sup> Matt 23:33 and John 8:11.

<sup>9</sup> Rom 7:17.

<sup>10</sup> William Hendriksen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, page 53<sup>b</sup>.

that one no longer notices it is wrong. (Matt 6:23). Sinners can even become *lovers of darkness*, preferring to remain in ignorance rather than have God reveal their sin so that they might repent (*read* John 3:19).

- (ii) *Death*. When we started looking at the subject of sin, we saw, from Rom 6:23, that it causes spiritual death. Ultimately this involves exclusion from heaven. Jesus told some parables to show how awful this would be. We shall look at this further in a later study, but for now read parts of two parables in Matt 13:41-42 and 47-50, which show the awful consequence of sin.

Activity3: Which of the following are sin in God's eyes?

- (a) A passing lustful thought.
- (b) Savouring the thought to commit adultery.
- (c) The act of adultery.
- (d) Plotting in the heart to take revenge.
- (e) Taking the opportunity for revenge without thinking about it.

**4. The Unforgivable Sin.** Perhaps the most disturbing words uttered by Jesus were when He spoke of a sin for which there was no forgiveness (*read* Mark 3:28-29). Some Christians who, through influence of others or personal struggles of faith, have denied the present-day manifestation of spiritual gifts, have been worried that they might have committed this sin. However, this is not the meaning that lies behind Jesus' words. Neither is it likely that Jesus was placing the sin of uttering words of blasphemy directed to the Holy Spirit above that of similar words directed to God the Father or the Son.

The context of this pronouncement gives us a clue to its meaning. The opponents of Jesus had witnessed remarkable healings and deliverances by Jesus, but were attributing His power to evil spirits (particularly Beelzebub, the prince of demons) rather than to the Holy Spirit. They could see the good Jesus was doing but were calling it evil. Hearts that are so stubbornly set against the truth are unable to respond to the truth revealed by the Holy Spirit. They virtually call the Holy Spirit a liar and are thus blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.

In rejecting the Holy Spirit's ministry, they cannot be truly convicted of sin, for it is the Holy Spirit Who *convict(s) the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.*<sup>11</sup> Without true conviction there can be no true repentance, and without true repentance there can be no forgiveness of sin. Thus, by blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (by calling His good ministry evil) the blasphemer is cutting himself or herself off from the Holy Spirit's ministry that leads to forgiveness.

Activity4: In discussion or personal thought, why can there be no half-way measures between sin and righteousness?

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<sup>11</sup> John 16:8.