

Righteousness, Not Self-Righteousness

Ponder: Standing for what is right without being self-righteous.

Scripture: “Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9, NKJV).

It’s good to know the truth. It’s good to stand for what is right according to God’s word. But it isn’t good to be self-righteous.

Jesus illustrated this point in His parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee fasted twice weekly, whereas Jews customarily fasted one day each week. He tithed all that he acquired. Certainly these acts were commendable if done in obedient faith, but the man’s attitude left much to be desired! Jesus said he “prayed thus with himself.” His prayer ascended no higher than the ceiling! He reminded God of his innocence of crimes like extortion and adultery. And, of course, he was oh-so-superior to that vile tax collector. It was almost as if he were saying, “God, You certainly are fortunate to have a fantastic servant like me!”

In stark contrast to the self-righteous Pharisee, the tax collector felt the heavy burden of his own sins, and pleaded for divine mercy (v. 13). He said nothing to criticize the self-righteousness or unkindness of the Pharisee. He simply acknowledged that he was “a sinner” (literally “the sinner” – the definite article emphasizes that he didn’t see himself as merely one of a multitude of sinners, but as the only one under consideration in his prayer). Jesus said the tax collector received what he requested; by God’s mercy, the man was justified (forgiven, acquitted of the charges against him, and not required to suffer the just penalty for his sins).

Let each of us remember that on our best day, we are inadequate and unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10). Even if we obeyed God completely, we would be doing only that which servants ought to do, and nothing more. The fact remains that we do not obey completely. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Never mind whether the next person is better or worse than you! Stand for what is right, but realize that you need the same mercy as everyone else.