

THE DEVIL'S DEVICES: SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

[Luke 18:9-14]

INTRODUCTION

- A. As we saw in our beginning lesson of this series, our enemy the Devil is busy striving to deceive and destroy as many souls as he can before time ends, and he has many devices at his disposal to achieve his goals. Again, as a reminder, Paul noted that we disciples should behave in a particular way so as to not give the Devil an opportunity to succeed, for “*we are not ignorant of his devices*” (2nd Cor. 2:11). The Devil has many ways he will try to tempt us and lead us astray or simply delay our interest and/or obedience to God's will, and the more we know about how he operates, the better prepared we will be to ensure we are able to [1] recognize his work and [2] defeat his efforts.
- B. Another of the ways he finds success in hindering men from obedience to the gospel — or convincing those who have already obeyed that they need not be concerned with their spiritual condition — is by instilling in them a measure of *self-righteousness*, or by making sure they see the self-righteous ones and are repulsed by their behavior to the point they no longer have any interest in spiritual matters because they have become convinced all religious people are the same. Self-righteousness is something that has dogged men throughout all civilizations and cultures and throughout all time, from the lowest in society to the highest, from the poorest to the richest, to those without education to the most educated. It is an attitude that infects men easily and is difficult to eliminate by the simple fact it is a belief that one is right, and nothing anyone can say to the infected ones would convince them otherwise!
- C. Today, let's continue our look at our spiritual enemy and adversary, the Devil, and one of his devices through which he leads men astray and causes much trouble in the world and in the church. In today's lesson — and in all the following lessons in this series — we will consider the particular device of our enemy, what it is, how it is used and/or demonstrated, its effects on us and others, and how to defeat this particular device. Brethren, we need to know how our enemy operates and what he uses but, more than that, we need to know how to defeat him and frustrate his efforts! Let's look...

I. THE DEVIL'S DEVICE: SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

- A. DEFINED. To properly understand this device, or weapon, of our enemy, we must properly understand just what it is and how it operates and what will result when he is successful in its planting; but we must begin with how it is defined:
 1. **Trusting in Our Own Righteousness.** The common definition of *self-righteousness* is the attitude of being *confident of one's own righteousness*. Jesus roundly criticized the religious leaders of the first century for this very attitude. He condemned those “*trusted in themselves that they were righteous*” (Luke 18:9) and taught that such men were not pleasing to God at all, though they certainly *thought* they were. Such ones were well-known to Paul, for they were his own countrymen and he had walked as one of them previously. These, he said, sought “*to establish their own righteousness*” and would not submit “*to the righteousness of God*” (Rom. 10:3). In their own minds, they *were* righteous and had no need for changing who they were or obeying anything beyond what they were already doing.
 2. **Intolerance and Denigration of Others.** The definition of *self-righteousness* goes on to say that it is

also being *smugly moralistic and intolerant of the opinions and behavior of others*. In the parable of the praying Pharisee and the praying publican, it is said that Jesus told this to those who “*trusted in themselves that they were righteous*” **and** “*despised others.*” It was bad enough that they thought so highly of themselves and trusted in themselves that they were righteous, but they added to the problem by then looking down on anyone and everyone who was not up to their standards [self] — which was pretty much everyone! That is the problem with this device of the devil; it causes us to think that we are always right and, as a result, everyone else must not be as righteous as we, as smart as we, as dedicated as we, as loving as we, as close to God as we, as knowledgeable as we, and any other way we can measure ourselves. Simply put, no one will ever live up to our standards because no matter what someone may say or do, we believe we are right; the natural consequence of this is, if someone differs from us, they must be wrong! The self-righteous will make judgments about others being “wrong” even on matters that are unimportant!

B. DEMONSTRATED. ***Self-righteousness*** can be demonstrated in many ways — too numerous to list and consider all of them in this lesson — but there are a few general ways it is demonstrated in a way that can be observed. Here are some ways we may demonstrate ***self-righteousness*** that we may recognize:

1. **Arrogant Self-Superiority.** ***Self-righteousness*** is seen when the guilty one believes he is simply better than others and that others should just naturally and without question submit to his superior intellect, opinions, and plans [again, even in things that just don't matter]. This was seen in the religious leaders of Christ's time when they had sent soldiers to arrest Jesus and they came back without Him, saying, “*No man ever spoke like this Man!*” (**John 7:46**), to which they replied, “*Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him?*” (**vv. 47, 48**) — as if they were the standard for what was right or acceptable or that their thoughts were the basis for what people could think about anything. Consider also the praying Pharisee, who said to **God**, “*God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector*” (**Luke 18:11**)!

Sometimes, we get so wrapped up in our own opinions, we wrongly begin to think we are better than others. Maybe it is a Christian who thinks he is “better” than non-believers by something of his own merit; maybe it is a brother who, for whatever reason, believes his opinions, ways, and comments should be simply accepted because, in his mind, he is superior. It happens far too often that brethren will set themselves against another brother who has been caught in sin by saying things like, “Well I never did what brother so-and-so did!” or “I would never do **that!**” Brethren, that is self-righteousness! Maybe it is a brother who questioned what has been said by an older, more respected brother, but is treated condescendingly and is simply told, “When you get older, you'll understand.”

[NOTE: Just because a man argues strenuously for a position or belief does not mean he is self-righteous; it may be that he is simply standing firm on the truth and the one who accuses him of being self-righteous just does not like the fact that he cannot refute what he is teaching. For example, how many times are Christian accused of this: “You Church-of-Christers think you're better than everyone else”? While there certainly have been arrogant brethren, many times it is just a case of being unable to refute the truth that has been taught and the one who says this uses it to deflect attention away from the real issue of them practicing or teaching error.]

2. **An Inability To See Faults in Self.** ***Self-righteousness*** may also be demonstrated in those who simply cannot see their own faults — but who can easily see the faults of others. Consider Simon, the Pharisee, who saw only the sinfulness of the woman who had come and washed Jesus' feet, but who did not see

any sin in himself (cf. **Luke 7:36-50**). Paul reprimanded certain Jewish brethren who were condemning others for the very deeds they were practicing (cf. **Rom. 2:1-3**). In each case, we see those who can easily see the faults in others but would deny their own sin, which may be even more obvious than the one they condemn in others. There is a reason Jesus warned us about our judgments of others (cf. **Matt. 7:1-5**).

Far too often, our enemy uses this device on us and convinces us our faults are nothing, but the faults of others are horrible and must be exposed. Self-righteousness will cause us to hear God's word and then see how others fail to live up to it but cannot see any personal application; it causes us to see ourselves as ones who are at the pinnacle of righteousness while all others are inferior. The problem in *self-righteousness*, you see, is that we are focused on others' faults, rather than on Christ or on what **we** need to do.

3. **Boasting in Even Good Things Done.** Our enemy uses some rather subtle means of getting us to practice self-righteousness — even when we are doing good things! Consider the Pharisee Jesus described, who boasted even to God, *“I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess”* (**Luke 18:12**). This man was so self-righteous, he thought nothing of boasting of his superiority to other men to even God! Consider also the hypocrites describe in **Matthew 6:2**, who gave to the needy, but sounded a trumpet *“in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.”* They wanted others to know without a doubt that they were righteous!

Sometimes, we work so hard at humility the devil starts whispering in our ear that we need someone to notice how humble we are! Sometimes, while going about living as disciples and doing the good deeds we do, we are convinced that we must tell others about what great things we have done *not* because we are trying to teach by example, but because we want them to see us as some superior example worthy of following, rather than pointing them to God and to Christ. Oh, our enemy is subtle, all right. Sometimes, we convince ourselves we must not remain silent about what we have done, lest it all go for naught!

4. **Refusing To Be Questioned.** Sometimes, self-righteousness manifests itself in the one who marvels at those who would dare question anything the man has said or done, or will simply not answer simple questions because he believes he is above question. Consider the religious leaders who questioned Jesus and the source of His authority, but when He turned the question back on them, they refused to answer because they knew they could not give an answer that would not make them look foolish or stubborn (cf. **Matt. 21:23-27**). From this and other confrontations with Jesus, they clearly thought of themselves as the authorities and that Jesus had no right to question them.

Quite frankly, it happens far too often today, too. When a preacher who has "made a name for himself" will not even deem to answer some younger or less-experienced brother who questions what he has taught, or questions what he is doing, it may just be that *self-righteousness* is the problem. I know a handful of preachers who will not even bother to respond to questions unless they deem the questioner of enough significance to answer. Many others are simply left to wonder because the man believes himself above question [and above the law, apparently], and, if asked about something he is continuing to teach, he replies, "I'm still studying it," and will not give an explanation for what he has *already* taught.

5. **Judgmental and Lacking Compassion.** One of the most recognized manifestations of *self-righteousness* is the practice of being judgmental and an unwillingness to show compassion to those

who are in difficult situations or even in sin. Consider the scribes and the Pharisees who brought to Jesus the woman caught in the act of adultery, but who were shamed by Jesus when He finally said to them, *“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her”* (cf. **John 8:1-11**). All these men could see was the sin in this woman, and they were willing to have her stoned to death. There was no compassion.

Unfortunately, this is one of the most widespread demonstrations of *self-righteousness*. It is heard when we sit in our Bible classes and instead of discussing how the passage under consideration applies to us or to me, we talk about how others are failing; it is seen when we see someone come into our assembly and we distance ourselves because they do not dress to the standard we deem "appropriate"; it is seen when we hear of others who have made poor choices and their lives are a mess and think only to ourselves how foolish they are, what poor choices they have made, and how they deserve the life they got. There is no compassion for those whose lives are not as easy as ours, for those who have more struggles with sin than we do, or who simply are not as spiritually mature as we are. We live as if everyone should think as we think, overcome temptation as easily as we do, and make all the right choices like we did. [Joyce Meyer]

6. **Justifying Self.** Finally, though not the least common demonstration of *self-righteousness*, is the habit of simply justifying self, no matter what. This is seen in the lawyer who came to Jesus, asking, *“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”* (**Luke 10:25**). When Jesus asked **him** to tell Him, the man replied as Jesus had — loving God and loving one's neighbor (**vv. 26, 27**), but when Jesus agreed with the man, he then asked Jesus, *“And who is my neighbor?”* (**vv. 28, 29**) — but not because he didn't know; he asked, *“desiring to justify himself.”* You see, this man thought he was *already* righteous and had no need of any improvement, and so he asked only thinking that he would be validated by Jesus. Even Job was guilty of this, condemned by Elihu for justifying himself, rather than God (**Job 32:2**).

Unfortunately, many people who claim to be followers of God and Christ and who even go so far as to "study" their Bibles fall into this error, for they go to God's word **not** to find God's will, but only to justify themselves. The lives they live do not agree with what Christ demands of them, but they will go to His word and select passages that justify any sin from homosexuality to adultery to lying and "justify" themselves by God's word, twisting it to their own destruction. And let us not think this is a problem of others! When we arbitrarily set standards that we are already meeting, rather than striving for excellence in our faith, we are effectively justifying self, rather than seeking to please the Lord.

- C. THE SPIRITUAL CONSEQUENCES. *Self-righteousness* is so dangerous and troublesome for what it does to us and to others when we demonstrate it. It is a favorite tool of the Devil if only for the fact of its spiritual consequences:

1. **Contention/Division.** It goes without saying that one who is *self-righteous* will have few who will want to associate with him, if only for the fact he sincerely believes he is better than anyone else. He will be a cause for contention because he thinks he is always right and no one can convince him otherwise, and because he looks down on all others, treating them as his inferiors. If not everyone agrees with him or defers to his views and ways, there will be no peace and, eventually, others will tire of his personality and his behavior and will go elsewhere. Between brethren of similar attitudes, there will be constant conflict because one will not give in to the other and neither will admit wrong. This is what our enemy seeks, for he knows as long as we are divided, he has a better chance of winning some

to his side and performing his evil deeds with little resistance from those too busy fighting amongst themselves.

2. **Continuing in and Justifying Error or Sin.** As long as one has an attitude of *self-righteousness*, he will not see his own errors or sin and will continue in it as long as he thinks he is right — a sad state that will likely never change as long as he is guilty of this sinful attitude. Many unbelievers remain in their sin because they do not admit it as sin; many religious people will follow error even after they have been shown from Scripture that what they believe and teach does not agree with God's word, if only for the fact they refuse to admit wrong; brethren will continue in sin and have sinful attitudes as long as they refuse to question their beliefs and practices and refuse to consider the possibility that they are in error. Again, this is what our enemy wants, for as long as he can convince one that what he is doing is not sin, then he has no further work to do with him; he has been won to the enemy already!
3. **Hindering Others.** From the descriptions of the demonstrations of *self-righteousness*, it isn't hard to imagine how this kind of behavior will discourage and repulse those who are sincerely seeking God's ways and who are searching for spiritual truth. When men see this kind of behavior among those who claim to be followers of God and Christ, they will have no desire to "be like them" or be with them as a part of the Lord's church. This behavior has been the cause of many to never obey the gospel and many more to quit assembling with fellow believers. As Jesus said of the hypocritical religious leaders of the first century, *"You shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in"* (**Matt. 23:19**). By their hypocrisy and self-righteousness, they hindered many from ever coming to God, and caused many to lose all interest in spiritual matters. Such will be — and is — the case today when we exhibit *self-righteousness*.
4. **Establishing An Erroneous Standard.** Finally, *self-righteousness* will cause much trouble among men because it shifts the authority and the right to decide what is right and good and what is wrong and evil from God and Christ to the man who is *self-righteous*. Though God's word tell us Christ has been given all authority (**Matt. 28:18**), the one who is *self-righteous* believes **he** is right, even when shown from God's word that he is not. Self becomes the standard and the authority, rather than Christ's words.

II. DEFEATING THIS DEVICE

- A. HUMILITY. It should be obvious by now that the antidote and answer to *self-righteousness* is *humility*.
 1. **I Must Consider the Possibility I Can Be Wrong.** *Self-righteousness* says "I am never wrong"; humility says, "I **could** be wrong." There is a reason Paul admonishes us to *"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith"* (**2nd Cor. 13:5**): We **could** be wrong! Humility helps us realize we **don't** know it all, that we have not reached spiritual perfection, and that we can still *"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* (**2nd Pet. 3:18**). That being true, it would mean there is a possibility of not knowing some fact or not understanding some passage and, thus, we **could** be wrong.
 2. **I Must Value Others More Than Myself.** As self-righteousness causes us to think of others as our inferiors, humility causes us to see others as more valuable than ourselves, or at least **as** valuable. It is for this reason Paul admonishes us to *"in humility count others more significant than yourselves"* (**Phlp. 2:3**). This, he said, is the mind of Christ, who did not think of Himself as too valuable to sacrifice for others who were, in fact, undeserving. Humility causes us to not even **consider** comparative worthiness among ourselves!

- B. REMEMBER AND UPHOLD THE CORRECT SPIRITUAL STANDARD. When ***self-righteousness*** takes hold of us, it causes us to elevate our importance to the point we think we have a right to decide what is right and good and to set aside the one who has the true right and authority: Jesus Christ. To defeat this attitude, we must recognize and uphold the correct standard; we must ask:
1. **What Does The Scripture Say?** Paul asked this question regarding the prophecy and meaning of the promises of God (**Gal. 4:30**), but this is something we should ask regarding ***any*** spiritual matter, rather than appealing to our personal ideals and opinions. Paul reminds us, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work*” (**2nd Tim. 3:16, 17**). We should note that Paul did not say that it was by any one man's opinion or stance that these things are true, but by “*all Scripture*”! What **I** think about it is ***irrelevant!***
 2. **Christ's Words the Standard.** Since Christ has been given all authority and since it will be by His words we will be judged in the end (**John 12:47, 48**) — rather than by **our** words — we would do well to appeal to the words of Jesus Christ, to see what **He** has said about it. We must get firmly in our minds and must daily remind ourselves of this fact, that Jesus alone has the authority to declare what is right and good, and what is or is not authorized, and my thoughts have no place in that decision. When Christ is established and maintained as the sole authority, and since every word He speaks is truth, we know our enemy cannot win and minds to his ways and he will be defeated.
- C. MAKE THE RIGHT COMPARISON. ***Self-righteousness*** is, in effect, often a matter of comparing self to others and [not surprisingly] always finding self to be better or more important than others. The problem lies in the fact we are comparing ourselves to the wrong thing [or person].
1. **Not Self versus The Worldly.** Often, the religiously ***self-righteous*** ones will compare themselves to those of the world because, well, you will always look better than them! He will pompously point to their numerous sins and to his spotless life and he will clearly be superior. But what happens when he compares his life, his knowledge, his mercy and compassion, and his worth to **Christ**? You see, that's what our enemy ***doesn't*** want us to do! He ***wants*** us to compare ourselves to the world so we will begin to think of ourselves so highly, we begin to think we're as good as Christ. It is when we truly take a look at Christ and then at ourselves that we will be repulsed by our own self-righteousness and think of ourselves in the proper light.
 2. **Not Self versus My Brethren.** Almost as often, brethren will compare themselves to one another and, just like the comparison to the world, it will not be hard to find someone "worse" than ourselves. Face it; unless I am a disciple who does absolutely nothing, I will be able to find someone I can say is not as "good" as I am. But what happens when I compare myself to Christ? It is then that I find that I have done ***nothing*** comparatively speaking, and that I cannot boast in myself. I will not be elevating myself, but I will be exalting Him to the position God gave Him in the church, and which He alone deserves. The simple fact is, to defeat ***self-righteousness***, we need to stop making any comparisons altogether involving self because it implies we have something we can point to as some sort of meritorious reason for Christ rewarding us in the end. The fact is, we were unworthy of eternal life and it is by the grace and mercy of God and the great love He and His Son had for us that any of us will be in heaven. None will be there by their own righteousness!

CONCLUSION

As we consider this device of our adversary, let us conclude by being reminded that *self-righteousness* is of man, and cannot compare to the righteousness that comes from God, through faith in Christ. We need to cease trusting in ourselves and in our own righteousness, and instead “*seek first the kingdom of God and **His** righteousness*” (Matt. 6:33). It is by that righteousness we will attain to the eternal home, not by our own.

Don't let our enemy deceive us into thinking we are the standard, that all others are inferior, and that there is no possibility of being wrong. Now is the time to put on humility and honesty and see ourselves we truly are: in need of a Savior, as servants of the Lord, and as students of the Master Teacher.