

Men, Ignorant of God's Righteousness, Would Fain Establish Their Own

Charles G. Finney:

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. Romans x: 3

Paul here states three facts in respect to the Jews, viz.: that they were ignorant of God's righteousness--that they sought to establish their own, and that they did not submit to God's. This is a condensed statement of their religious condition. The fundamental difficulty with them was, their ignorance of God's righteousness. On this rock the nation were wrecked. Not knowing Jesus, they were forever going about to establish their own righteousness--and forever unsuccessful.

What was true of the Jews is still true to an alarming extent of multitudes, both in and out of the church, among all classes in Christian lands. It may be said that all do this who are not really Christians and receive Christ.

In discussing this subject, I enquire,

I. When one may be said to be ignorant of God's righteousness.

I answer, when he does not truly know God: particularly when he does not know Him as he reveals himself in the spirituality of his law. It was at this point the Jews failed. They did not see that the law called for the inmost heart and for perfect love there. Their carnal eye was attracted by the external and ceremonial, and the amount of visible doing in the Mosaic system gratified their ambition for distinction and display, so that they quite overlooked those very explicit statements, everywhere frequent throughout their scriptures, which were designed to call attention to the state of the heart as the only thing of real value in God's sight.

God's righteousness and perfect purity of character are revealed in his law, and are especially to be learned there.

Again, men are ignorant of God's righteousness when they do not understand his method of making sinners righteous. The Jews did not feel any need of such a system as the gospel. They supposed they should be accepted if they merely obeyed their ceremonial law. In this they made a grand and fatal mistake. God never gave that law for this purpose, but for another entirely different from this. It was only introductory to the real gospel--intended to prepare the way for it. That ceremonial hinted plainly at the true system, and aimed to illustrate the great principles upon which it reposes.

It is remarkable that sinners generally have no idea of God's plan of securing in them what he commands. They look no further than the precept and the penalty, and seem utterly unaware that the high aim of God is to bring them back to obedience and love. Hence God must bring them first under a felt sentence of death; but this does not make them righteous; it only prepares the way for bringing them to Christ.

Again, men are ignorant of God's righteousness when they fail to understand the conditions on which He can treat them as righteous, that is, can justify and save them. This was the mistake of the Jews and is the mistake of all sinners. They do not understand how it is that God proposes to make them righteous, and turn them from all their sin.

II. I am next to enquire, When men may be said to go about to establish their own righteousness.

And first, what is meant by establishing one's own righteousness?

Suppose you see a man come into a court of justice. He is accused. He pleads not guilty. In some way he justifies his conduct. Perhaps he will even attempt to prove his own entire righteousness in the whole transaction, so that he* can face the judge down and insist that in every particular he has done nothing wrong and only what is right. This would be going about to establish his own righteousness.

Sinners go about to establish their own righteousness when they bring in pleas of excuse for their sin. If a man can show his right under the circumstances to do as he does, this goes to establish his righteousness. So sinners go about to parry conviction--to bring in extenuating and justifying circumstances. Of this, God accuses them: "Wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?"

Legitimately, the bearing of an excuse goes to arraign God. What do you mean, sinner? So you think God can accept your apology, and admit himself to be wrong? If not, why do you present it? Why bring it up before your

Almighty Judge, to insult him to his very face, by impeaching his equity?

Every sinner who brings forward any form of excuse for his own sin, is really trying to establish his own righteousness.

Again, men are trying to establish their own righteousness when they depend on doing right for acceptance with God. How often do they tell you they mean to do about right, showing plainly by their manner, and by the use they make of this supposed intention, that they think hereby to secure favor with God. They turn off his claims with this plea, and so not at all believe they are in danger of being sent to hell. Now is this anything else but going about to establish their own righteousness?

The same must be said of those who depend on their own reformation. I often meet with young persons, who, before they came here, had been much more loose, in many points of moral conduct, as for instance, the observance of the Sabbath; but coming here they attempt to reform, and this greatly relieves their consciences. Of course, now they are in a good way, and think themselves almost sure of heaven; whereas this reform may be wholly due to their love of a fair reputation. Mingling here with people who themselves observe the Sabbath, and who have established this general usage, they are forced to conform, and do so, without any more regard for God than they had before.

Such persons I have seen pass through other stages of self-righteous endeavor. They become convicted of sin, and begin to pray perhaps. Still they are uneasy, and, therefore, resort to some forms of external reformation. How very common is this among the masses of awakened sinners! Many of you who are before me, have had this sort of experience. How long it took you to understand that you were all wrong, and that nothing would avail for you short of a most radical change of heart.

In the same train of feeling, men depend on having done nothing worthy of condemnation. Indeed! What is this but going about to establish their own righteousness? They think they have done nothing that can justify God in sending them to hell. On this point they take issue with God, assuming that they have done nothing very wrong. They must know that, in God's sight, sin deserves hell, else He would not have built hell, nor have made it the penalty of sin. How, then, should they dare to dispute this point with God, and arraign him on the implied charge of injustice!

The same thing is seen, under a slightly different form when men depend on their general integrity of character. They have been honest and kind, and on the whole, so good that they think God cannot send them to hell, but will strike the balance in their favor. They have done a great many things that are about right. On the whole, they have done more good than hurt, and therefore, they are sure it cannot be right for God to send them to hell. Their life shows more obedience than disobedience--as they insist.

Indeed, sinner! What do you know of personal holiness? What experience have you of a pure heart--of real love to God--of sincere regard for his will? Surely, you are only going about to establish your own righteousness.

Again, sinners evince the same spirit when they hold on to the idea that they are about as good as professors of religion. Some such, they know of, who are not any better than they should be, and with whom they think their own case might compare favorably. Such, are going about to establish their own righteousness.

Also, when they depend on their religious observances. Many have learned better than to rely on their honesty or morality;--so they resort to their religious observances. Like the Catholics, they, virtually, count their beads, and doup their senseless, unmeaning services;--yes, even Protestants do this, and just as really make a merit in these observances, as the poor man who expects to go to heaven, by kneeling before the holy altar, kissing the holy wafer, and saying his Ave Marias. This Protestant prays just like the Catholic--that is, with the same purpose, and the same state of heart; he reads his Bible on the same principle, and in the same way goes through what he calls his "religious duties."

This was the mistake of the Jews. They fasted twice in the week--were greatly given to prayer and alms to the poor. In these services, their scribes, priests, and Pharisees, spent a great share of their time. Thrice a year they went up to Jerusalem to the solemn feasts. Religious duties absorbed a large share of their time and money. You would be appalled to learn how much their temple cost, and their religious worship, sacrifices and offerings. On all these they placed the utmost dependence. But evermore, when men rely on other methods of salvation than God's, they are really going about to establish their own.

III. I am next to enquire what this righteousness of God is--this of which sinners are so ignorant.

In general, God's righteousness is synonymous with his infinite moral purity; but, in such connections as this, it seems to mean more specifically his integrity as a moral Governor, bound to sustain the interests of his government in its relations both to the unfallen and to the fallen. Under the most solemn obligations to do his utmost to secure universal obedience as a necessary means to the highest happiness, he cannot suffer law to be broken, nor rebels to live--except on the ground of some satisfaction made, that shall amply sustain the sanctity and honor of law. Of course, this quality of his character, as a moral Governor, determines the great features of his plan of saving sinners. It stands revealed in his law and in his gospel. This righteousness of God renders it forever certain that no sinner can be accepted on the ground of any works of his own. God's claims are so high, and the sinner has fallen so low, that God can never accept any work of his hands. Even his prayers--out of Christ--and his best works are all odious to God. He is trying to put God off with something less than a perfect heart.

By the very terms and spirit of the law, it demands perfect obedience, and the exigencies of God's great kingdom require no less. The law, in both its precept and penalty, must be honored, or no sinner can be saved. I do not mean that God will insist that the utmost measure of penalty shall be visited on the sinner's own person;--but it must be this, or a substitute that will answer the one great end of fully sustaining the dignity, influence, and authority of his law. His throne must be infinitely removed from all supposable connivance with sin.

Hence, it became necessary that our Surety should honor the law, as to its penalty, by offering his humanity on the altar of his divinity. In his own person, too, he obeyed the law fully.

Hence, sinners, to be saved, must return to real obedience. God's righteousness requires this.

We can now apprehend God's method of making sinners personally righteous. First he opens the way, by giving his Son to honor the law, so that God can come down from heaven and enter into covenant with the sinner and draw him back to life and love. This is God's method--that Christ be received as the sinner's righteousness, having borne for him the curse of the law, obeying it perfectly, and then suffering in place of the penalty, which the sinner else must have suffered. The sinner, by faith accepting Christ, becomes, in the governmental respect, united to Christ, so that, for Christ's sake, God accepts them both. Families sometimes come into such a relation to government, that the children stand in the stead of the parents, and are rewarded or forgiven for their parents' sake. Similar is the relation sustained by Christ and the believing sinner to the government of God. Christ is "set forth to be a propitiation for us through faith in his blood," in this sense, that the merits of his death are made over to us, on condition of our believing, and we have the full benefit of all that Christ has suffered and done to honor the law. We now abandon all hope of justification from personally obeying the law, and receive Christ as God's mode of making us right before the law. He is given to us as a Redeemer and Savior. He is treated in this transaction as if he had been a sinner,--we, as if we were righteous.

Thus we stand before God as if in Christ. Paul said--"If any other man thinketh he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more;" * * "touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless;"--but what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ, * * that I may be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ--the righteousness which is of God by faith.

Thus by a governmental act, God merges in Christ the whole mass of believers--he having become our Surety, our Advocate, Mediator and King. In this wonderful arrangement, God turns the whole race round from looking to the law for justification, to looking unto Christ.

Submission to God's righteousness is the condition of salvation. So the apostle implies. "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." Here you cannot fail to observe that this method of salvation is something to be submitted to. The will must yield its full assent to this plan.

The constant effort of sinners is to do something of their own--some work of some sort, or get up some experience. This is the great idea which they aim to realize as soon as they are convicted. Hence they cannot have peace of mind, nor real pardon, because they do not meet God's plan. They struggle against God's Spirit, and resist his influence; they turn and shift in all possible ways to get up some righteousness of their own. The seventh chapter to the Romans, is only a picture of one who is struggling and floundering as in a spiritual quagmire--bringing himself by promises and resolves, and yet finding them all of no avail. What masses of even professed Christians, are in precisely this condition! They make not a prayer in which they do not feel condemned. Their state is one of conviction and despair, so deeply agonizing that they can have no peace.

They are struggling to effect an impossibility,--to establish, in some way, their own righteousness; and failing in this, they sink down into despair. Hence it comes to pass that the last step a man takes before submission to God is usually a mighty effort to establish his own righteousness;--which effort ends in despair, after which, he consents to submit to God's plan of being made righteous. How often have I seen this in professors who thought they knew what religion is, but in the clear light of these truths have seen their mistake. If they come really to despair of help in themselves, and then cast their souls on God through Christ, all is well. Probably most ministers find cases of this sort. Great numbers of them have fallen under my observation. How many have I seen who struggle and struggle, long, and without relief, because they struggle in a wrong direction. They are ignorant of God's righteousness, and therefore go about to establish one of their own. A striking case now occurs to me, of a lady, now on mission-ground, a lady of many noble traits of character, but before her conversion, strong in her self-righteousness. Hearing of the great revivals in Oneida County, some thirty years since, she came to see them. Her object was to learn what this new and strange movement might be. She heard sermon after sermon, but writhed under their pointed truths, often finding fault with the preaching as being too personal, and as being full of wrong things. Conviction, however, sank deeper and yet deeper. Soon a friend with whom she was boarding, said to me--We have a dreadful case at our house--you must come and see her. I went. I found she had set herself to defend the idea that she did not deserve to be damned, for if she was a sinner, it was only because she was made so, and born so. Being cornered up on these points, and shown her error, she became more agonized; the struggle was fearful! At last she screamed at the top of her voice, and yielded! Then a change came over her--a charming, glorious change, which no language can describe. Almost her first words, as she broke silence again, were--"I'll be a missionary!" But few months passed ere this vow was fulfilled, and she has lived a missionary to this day. Her self-righteousness, like a mighty tower of strength, came down wonderfully;--and when Jesus became her righteousness, she was a lamb at his feet. Such a change in the whole being, manifest in every aspect, is truly wonderful.

Often it happens that you see professors of religion moving heaven and earth by their self-righteous efforts to get up some righteousness of their own. You will be struck in examining their religious system, to see how utterly Christ is left out of it, as a practical Savior. They think of their good and right things--not of Christ--as really the ground of their hope before God.

This method of God's righteousness is exactly opposed to human pride. Pride loves to do the work and have the honor of it; but God's system has done all the meritorious work itself--leaving nothing for man to do that he can be proud of.

It is for this reason that conversion costs such a conflict. Often it seems indispensable that God should startle sinners with awful fears before they will yield. On Mt. Sinai and all around, the trump of God waxed louder and louder--the mountain is all ablaze, and rocks quake under Jehovah's mighty voice long and loud, till every nerve of the sinner trembles, and he sees nothing but darkness--until the atonement reveals a living Christ to his agonized soul.

This gospel plan seems to sinners deep and dark as midnight, till the Holy Ghost reveals to him his self-righteousness, cleaves down that self-righteous spirit, knocks out his props, and he falls and dies!--then the cross reveals life, and he rejoices with exceeding joy in a salvation wrought of God through redeeming blood.

This righteousness of God must be submitted to. The sinner must submit to--that righteousness which has sentenced him to hell. He must admit it to be right and just. I often ask sinners--Are you prepared to subscribe to that righteousness which dooms you to hell? If I find him wavering on that point, I say to him--You do not understand God's righteousness. You cannot be saved till you subscribe to God's righteousness in this--till you fully admit its justness and propriety. You must yield also to his supreme authority and right to govern all his creatures, and consent to be saved wholly by grace--things which many fail to understand. In England, I found, to my surprise, that many ministers talked much of grace, yet did not believe that men deserve damnation for their sins. I said to them--What do you mean by this? You talk largely of grace, yet deny all need of it! For, grace is the antithesis of justice. How can there be grace shown the sinner, if it be not just to punish him?

The point of greatest struggle with the sinner is in laying aside as worthless, his own righteousness. You recollect the case of the poor Indian and his rich white neighbor, both awakened and convicted at the same time, but the Indian came at once to Jesus, while the white man remained a long time in extremest darkness and distress. At last, he asked the Indian how it happened that he found Christ so soon, while himself had sought so long in vain. The Indian stammered his reply--"Indian poor; white man rich; poor Indian no clothes; white man good clothes, fine clothes; Indian throw his old rags right away, take Christ's robe at once; white man can't throw away his fine clothes."

You recollect, also, the case of the poor woman in the gospel. Christ had been invited to a rich man's table; they sat reclined at their meal, with their feet somewhat extended behind them, when this woman came up gently, clasped his sacred feet, bathed them with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Blessed woman! She knew her position as a lost sinner, and she had tasted the grace that forgives freely. What an act was that! She did not seem to know or care if the whole world saw her! Her humility of spirit charms us, and we read in her case the feeling of those who discard all righteousness of their own, and come to understand the righteousness of God.

REMARKS.

The ignorance of the Jews came of their great pride, and is not at all to be ascribed to the obscurity of the subject itself. The ignorance of sinners now, even under the gospel, is amazing. I have recently seen one who had been well instructed in the letter of these things, yet when he became deeply hungry for gospel life, seemed scarcely to know how to use one of the plainest truths it embraces. It was affecting to see him drink in a few of the simplest gospel truths, saying--["I am sure I never heard of that before--never thought of that." How common it is for sinners, under the Spirit's light, to say--"All this is new to me; I wonder I was never told of this before!"

Many feel the need of becoming truly religious; they mean to be, and they set themselves to work for it in some way. Perhaps they set themselves to serve God, but have no right idea of what it is to be truly religious. Hence, we find so few who seem, in their own experience, to know the deep power of the gospel. Ah, the deep foundations of their selfishness are not broken up. They have never been made conformable to Christ's death. Hence, the difference between this class and those who are utterly cut down and slain by the law--then raised from the dead to a new life in Christ.

When the sinner is truly convicted of sin, the way opens before him, and the first conditions are fulfilled for his free pardon. Now, he has new apprehensions of God's law--of its great spirituality. But it is not enough to know this; another lesson yet remains. I am glad to see you cut down under thorough conviction, but you must also learn not to fly in the face of that fiery law for salvation! Sinner, professed Christian, do you know how you are to be saved? You need not make any atonement; you need not suffer and toil to work up an atonement; no need of this at all. In my own first convictions, I said, under my great sorrow--I shall have to bear a great deal of this, I have been a sinner so long; I shall have to be nearly killed before I can be saved. Ah, how mistaken! God wants no such atonement--no such suffering of you. The atonement is all made, ready to your hands! Do you understand that no works, or prayers, or tears of your own can do anything for you towards an atonement, and towards constituting a ground of your acceptance before God? God himself has provided the lamb for the offering. Now come, as the ancient Jew came, and lay your hand on that dear sacrifice, and there confess your sins. The vail of the great temple is rent away, and you may enter the inner sanctuary; may come quite to the mercy-seat and lay your own hand on the head of the victim that takes away the sin of the world. Will you come?