

Is Anybody Listening?

Somewhere, in one of the books I've been reading, I came across a quote that I think worth repeating. The quote went something like this: "The one sin that grieves the heart of God more than any other is the sin of self righteousness." The truth of this thought is born out in Jesus' little parable about the prayers of a self righteous pharisee as contrasted with the prayers of a lowly tax collector. In Luke 18:9-14, we read,

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'" This is consistent with what we find throughout the Bible. **God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.**

In Luke 14:8-11 Jesus tells his followers: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Paul says in Romans 12:3, "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

Not only does our attitude in this regard affect our relationship with God; it also affects our relationship with everyone else around us, and especially with those closest to us. When we seek to justify ourselves and make excuses for our failures rather

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than humbling ourselves, confessing our mistakes, and asking for forgiveness, we do great damage to our relationships. In order to make our marriages work, to be a good parents, friends, employees, or bosses. Humility and honesty go a long way; whereas arrogance and denial will always cause us to lose respect. We even see this in the highest places in government. Politicians often get into more trouble for trying to cover up their mistakes, than for the mistakes themselves.

It is not too strong to say God hates hypocrisy. He hates it when we put on false fronts. He hates it when we say one thing and do another. He hates it when we lie about who we are or what we've done. He hates it when we act one way in church and another way in our homes or at school or in the workplace. **God hates cover-ups.**

We see this in the beginning of the Bible. Do you remember what Adam and Eve did after they disobeyed God? They tried to hide from God among the trees of the garden. And besides that they made skirts of fig leaves in an attempt to cover their nakedness and their shame. Do you remember how God responded to their attempt to hide and cover up? God found them in their hiding place. God elicited their confession and listened to their lame excuses. Then God replaced their flimsy self-made fig leaf skirts with animal skins, a sacrifice of blood.

In our scripture lesson from Romans 10:1-3, Paul says of his own people, the Israelites: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."

This was the choice God placed before the Israelites and this is the choice God places before us: We can cling to our own, self invented ways of dealing with our sins and be forever lost or we can receive God's provision for our sins and be saved. We can attempt to hide beneath our own fig leaf skirts, or we can accept the blood sacrifice made for us on that old rugged cross. We can try to make it work our way or humble ourselves to God's way.

In Romans 10:4-8, Paul describes God's way; he says, "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness

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for everyone who believes. Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: 'The man who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) or "Who will descend into the deep?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming:"

Now this business about ascending into heaven to bring Christ down or descending into the deep to bring Christ up, seems confusing when we first read it. What in the world is Paul talking about? But when we realize that Paul is simply quoting from Deuteronomy 30:11-14, and read the quote in context it makes a lot more sense. Moses says, "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

When Paul says "Christ is the end of the law," he is saying that Christ is the replacement for the law. Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament Law and Christ is the replacement for that law. As Christians, we do not go back to Old Testament Law and try to obey that Law in order to be put right with God. That's like making fig-leaf skirts all over again. No, as Christians we look to Christ, we trust in Christ, we follow and obey Christ. We are put right with God by trusting in Christ and in Christ alone for our salvation. **There is no other way.**

We need to be careful here, for there are a number of movements today that insist that we need to return to the law in one form or another in order to be saved, and some of those movements call themselves "Church of God." Others go so far as to require their members to essentially become Jewish, and to keep Jewish laws and rituals before they can be fully accepted. This is very dangerous ground because what such people are saying whether they will admit it or not is that Christ isn't enough. No you have to have other trappings in addition to Jesus Christ in order to secure your salvation. This kind of teaching invites the kind of self-righteousness that God hates and that Jesus warns us against. Any church or religious organization that forces you

to go through a bunch of gobblely gook in order to be saved has strayed from historic Christianity and is very dangerous.

Look again at what Paul tells us: we don't have to travel high or search deep mysteries to find the secret to life. Jesus has come near us and He is near us. He is risen from the grave and He is with us. He is continually speaking to us through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Paul says, "the word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart." And that word, the one word that judges every other word, is Jesus Christ. He is the One we need and He is all we need to be put right with God. To know and love Him and to love our neighbors through Him, is all that God requires of us. It's that simple. We must not let anyone confuse us or make it complicated. We just need to pay attention to Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on from Romans 10:8-13 "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

You will notice the absence of any kind of religious trappings here. Paul doesn't say confess and believe **and** keep the Sabbath laws. He doesn't say confess and believe **and** avoid different kinds of food. He doesn't say confess and believe **and** observe certain rituals. Not at all; only "confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead" and you will be saved. It's clear, strait forward, and uncomplicated: speak it and believe it. Jesus is risen from the dead and Jesus Christ is Lord. If we get a good handle on this that's all we need.

Paul concludes his thought in our scripture for today by observing in Romans 10:14-17: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet

of those who bring good news!' But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

I want to say something about this as it applies to our brothers and sisters in Christ who are physically deaf. No one will be excluded from the kingdom of God because they cannot hear physically. This is not the kind of hearing Paul is talking about. What Paul is talking about is heart and mind hearing. What we need in order to have a saving relationship with God is for the Holy Spirit to make the word of God alive to our hearts and minds. It is Christ within us who gives us the hope of glory. It's His voice within we need to attend to and obey.

Just as Jew and Gentile are on equal footing before God, and need to trust Christ for salvation, so it is with the deaf and with the hearing. Whether the external message comes to us through sound or sign, God speaks to us internally Spirit to spirit. And, ultimately, it is this word at this level we need to hear and obey. 17th Century monk, Jean Pierre De Caussade says, "In Jesus we have a master to whom we do not sufficiently listen."

What I am suggesting to all of us this morning is just this: We need to learn how to listen to the Lord who speaks in us. We need to ask Him to make Himself known, then humbly hear and obey His voice. It is this internal relationship with the Lord, informed and guarded by the external word of God, that marks us as God's children. In this relationship we find assurance of our salvation and the power to live as living examples of God's love for all the world. Is anybody listening?

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Sermon for September 4, 2011

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Romans 10:1-17

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