

The Slippery Slope to Self-Righteousness

Perhaps one of the deadliest things in the spiritual realm is self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is a stench in the nostrils of God. It started way back with Cain presenting a sacrifice on his own terms. It continues today with man forever inventing religions and paths to God, refusing to take His exclusive door in Jesus Christ. Sadly, self-righteousness is not limited to those who are unsaved. Thus, some of the greatest murders, genocides and wicked wars were committed with people singing the praises of God on their lips. In the church today, scores of people live day to day by seeking out righteousness on my own terms. How is it possible? Some of the worst emotional and spiritual abuse takes place in churches, where the Spirit of Christ should be the lubricant between human personalities. Yet those perpetrating the abuse say ‘I answer to God, my conscience is clear before Him’. How is it possible? People wreak havoc in their families, and then point a finger at others, saying, “I followed God with all my heart”, yet they were disobedient.

How is it possible, that so many individuals think that their wickedness is actually their obedience to God that is being misunderstood? How can people commit physical and emotional atrocities and not feel shame, guilt or anguish, instead sometimes even feeling satisfied and self-congratulatory? How is it possible that people can have such differing views on right and wrong when we have the same Bible?

It really has to do with the sin of self-righteousness.

There is only one thing that restrains sin finally and totally, and that is the Holy Spirit’s work. When a person has either hardened his heart to that conviction, or has never heard it in the first place, it is easy to decide on your own terms what is right and wrong. From there, it is a short walk to not answering to anyone, to defining all your actions on your own terms, reasoning them out, calling them necessary and acceptable, and basically creating your own morality. Once evil has been called good, there is no longer any need to explain it to others, to be accountable, for the cry is, “I know I’m doing right, I answer to God alone”. Thus the sin of self-righteousness is firmly entrenched in the person’s life.

A self-righteous person then is perhaps one of the most dangerous on earth because

- 1) He can commit evil without conviction or guilt. Nothing is deadlier or worse than self-righteousness because self-righteousness is an anesthetic that dulls the pain of real conviction. You don’t have to face the pain or the horror of your own sin if you consider it to be righteousness and the sin belongs to others.
- 2) He believes God is behind him in his actions. Self-righteousness gives a person strength to trample over others, since self-righteousness is convinced that all others are wrong and he alone is true to God and His Word. It consoles the person committing it that he is, in fact, not only fine before God, but his acts are condoned and encouraged by Him. The person considers the hurt he does to others as necessary loss to his single-minded obedience to God. The attitude is ‘I obey God, I can’t worry if others don’t like it or get hurt!’

Such a deadly combination will produce someone who sins blatantly and wickedly without remorse or hesitation, thinking he is, in fact, controlled by God.

How does one get to this stage?

For clarity sake, we'll define the descent into self-righteousness in three stages.

The first stage is the crucial one. It can be defined as **refusing to be vulnerable before God**. That might sound like a mouthful, so let's break it down a little. Listen to God's word in Isaiah 66:2: "For all those *things* hath mine hand made, and all those *things* have been, saith the LORD: but to this *man* will I look, *even to him that is poor* and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" David echoes these words in Ps 51:17: "The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

God is saying that what He values most is the attitude of brokenness before Him. One that is humble in the sense that he does not justify himself, or seek to save face before God. He can go before God and break. He will suffer the awful confrontation with a holy God, when those penetrating searching eyes look through him and see every sin. It is a worse feeling than being naked and humiliated before a crowd. It is the penetrating gaze of God on a guilty sinner. God treasures the one who is willing to endure that, who will come to Him with no excuses, not trying to put fig leaves over his nakedness, not pointing fingers at Eve, or the serpent, but just claiming ownership for your sin. Breaking before God, bowing the neck and begging for forgiveness. Such a person trembles at God's words, sin disturbs him, he earnestly desires to please God, he hates the thought of having disappointed God. He knows God will forgive, He knows the gracious and ever-loving heart of God, but that never minimizes the sin and the offence to God.

God treasures such a heart. Why? Because this kind of heart is honest. It simply accepts the truth about itself, falls on nothing but God's mercy and grace and asks him to restore the relationship. How intimate is a marriage when partners refuse to accept the wrongs they have done to each other, but continually blame the other? Such a relationship will always have a wall of dishonesty between the two people.

Have you ever confronted a person about his sin? You know he is not repentant when the conversation is 'Yes... but' "Yes... but what about you?" "Yes, but.. so and so caused me to." "Yes, well, why are you so spiritual?" Basically, the heart has not broken. There is merely a concession to maintain the appearance of humility, but there has been no brokenness. No absolute vulnerability before God, to be open, exposed, naked and revealed to Him, no excuses, no pointing fingers.

Jesus taught us this in Luke 18:9-14: "And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. ¹¹The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men *are*, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. ¹²I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. ¹³And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as *his* eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

Notice first it is clearly about self-righteousness. The Pharisee is saying *Yes, but. Yes, Lord, I am confessing my sins, but you must be glad I'm not as bad as so and so. Yes, I'm confessing my sins but look at all the good I do; you know me, I'm not that bad.* Religious, but unrighteous. Yet there stands the tax collector, supposedly the worst of

sinners, and he, in a broken spirit, faces the depth of his sin. He trembles at God's Word and comes to God just as he is, pleading God's mercy. Jesus is clear which heart received forgiveness.

The Bible uses an interesting expression in Scripture. It speaks of a stiff-necked people. Now, that is a very telling illustration. If you have ever told people something they don't like, they will react one of two ways. If they reject your words, you often see a literal physical reaction of stiffening the neck, the head is cocked back, the neck goes tight, as if to say 'What are you talking about'. The other reaction is the opposite, the neck literally relaxes, the head hangs down, the person faces their shame and guilt, they break.

Now the first step toward self-righteousness is to lose this heart and to be stiff-necked. We no longer truly break before God. We become a shameless, guiltless people, believing those things to be negative and having no place in the life of a child of God. We confess our sins, but it has become a simple, painless ritual. "Lord, where I sinned against you, please forgive me". Our heart feels about as much shame as asking Him for our daily bread. There has been no breaking, no real vulnerability before God, no real asking His eyes to search us like David prayed in Psalm 139:23-24. And if we do pray that, do we wait long enough for that to occur, or do we hurry off, relieved if after 10 seconds we felt no conviction? See, here self-righteousness begins, with a heart that is beginning to deceive itself. It does not truly want conviction. It does not truly want God's righteousness. In fact, more than anything, it wants to dispense with guilt and shame, and it sees confessing sin as a way of avoiding it. I'm not advocating a morbid self-loathing, or ongoing guilt, but a person who cannot stay long enough in the presence of God to end up seeing his sin the way God does is perhaps not really interested in that anyway. Yet in I John 1:9 'confess' literally means that.

Here is the acid test to see if you are truly being vulnerable before God: Can you handle a rebuke from man? Surely, if you have faced God's conviction and accepted it as true and repented, then how hard can it be to face the conviction of man? But here is where our hearts fail. Can you listen to a rebuke from a younger person? From a less experienced one? Or do you react with disbelief, anger and denial? See, that's the "Yes, but" attitude. A broken attitude, at the very least will say, "You've given me something to think about. Let me pray over it, think about it, and we'll talk about it again soon." But an unbroken heart will not. It is afraid of the horror of its own sin. It runs a mile from the truth about its own failures. So it consoles itself with the seeds of self-righteousness, "it's not as bad as so-and-so's sin, well I'm trying, well, God knows I do my best". But it comes down to a refusal to truly be exposed and vulnerable before God. For if we start there, what is it to be exposed and vulnerable before man?

The second stage follows on from that one. The sinner who can never face the implications of what others are saying moves on to the next stage, and that is a **subtle pride**.

Now all pride is subtle in a sense, but here especially so. Self-righteousness begins to tell you, "Others just don't understand me. All they do is judge and criticize. They don't know how I grew up, my background. They don't know what I struggle with. They don't know my personality, and how I feel inside. I am truly misunderstood. Others just cannot know what's in my heart, and why I do what I do."

Now, like any lie, there is some truth to this. No one except God can ever truly know you and understand you. But the deeper lie here is the lie that others are too ignorant, too foolish, too uninformed, too critical, too sinful, too judgmental to truly know me. Basically, others are not authorized to confront me about my sin, because they are less than me. Oh, you might not think it as blatantly as that, but you will say in your heart ‘they are critical people, biased in their opinions, they are foolish or backslidden, and therefore it is unnecessary to listen to them’ The lie here is that you have the right to decide who you will accept accountability from, and basically filter out the rest. Again, there is a sliver of truth here. The Bible tells us we are not to be man-pleasers, we are to do everything as unto God. He is the one we answer to, and the one we obey. Also, there are foolish scorners, whose opinions should be considered with a pinch of salt. But a truth taken to an extreme is in danger of becoming a lie.

Answering to God alone must never become ignoring accountability from others. God uses other believers as one of His means of convicting you. This is what Christ meant in Matthew 18:18-19. He had just given instruction on rebuking others and church discipline. He finishes it with these statements. He is saying that if more than one Spirit-filled believer agree on something, then that thing is more than likely true and of God. Now that statement could easily be abused. A divisive group in a church could say, “Well, we agree on ousting the pastor, therefore God is with us” That’s exactly what we are *not* saying. The passage teaches like Galatians 6:1, that Spirit-filled believers, i.e. those who are grounded in the Word, living obediently, lovingly and humbly before God, if they come to a common conclusion about something in your life, which they can show you from Scripture, and you reject them, you are on dangerous ground. Proverbs is full of sayings regarding the fool who cannot handle a rebuke, while the wise man thanks you for it. But the man who decides that basically most people are in error about him is on a slippery slope. Such a man has believed the lie that he can be the boss of other people’s rebukes. He may even say, “I have been so hurt by so many people over the years; I’m not a doormat anymore.” This man is in a precarious state.

Scripture is clear that we need others to show us our faults. Even if you are obeying stage 1, you can easily slip into a place of complacency and comfort at your spiritual state. We need the outside observer to show us what they see. Prov 18:17: “*He that is first in his own cause seemeth just; but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him.*” God instituted this in Scripture Galatians 6:1, Matthew 18:15-20. Why? Clearly the Lord knew that there would be cases where our own walk with God would require outside intervention from other believers. Clearly He knew that our heart was prone to self-deception, to flattering ourselves in our own eyes. Psalm 36:2: “For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful.” We often need the shock of hearing what others see when they look at us. It’s said a smoker cannot smell his own smoke, while others, who don’t are acutely aware of it. So with sin. Too often, you cannot smell your own brand of fleshliness and sin, and others who don’t fall in ways you do must show your sin to you. The one who has no one to be accountable to probably is like that because that is what he prefers. You don’t want your neighbour to search you. You don’t want to hear your faults, and your sin. You are quite comfortable in your personal devotions and prayer, thank you very much, you don’t need some misguided fool telling you what he thinks is wrong in your life. Subtle pride: no one is qualified to evaluate me. But truly, the godliest leaders can look into the eyes of their spouse, their children and their congregation and say,

“Evaluate me”. Why don’t leaders do that? Subtle pride: “the congregation are stupid and carnal, they’ll never understand me, my kids are brats, no gratitude, anyway” and so on. But it comes back to running from the pain of vulnerability, to face our own ugliness, weakness and sinfulness, not on our terms, in our time, but on His, and His often includes using other believers.

Why else did James instruct us in James 5:16: “Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.”? Woe to the man who says he will be accountable to himself, subtle pride is present, and the seed of self-righteousness has already sprouted.

The third and final stage is **thinking God condones it all**. It is the nail in the coffin. It seals a heart in disobedience when it can convince itself that it is actually obedience. Listen to Jesus’ words in John 16:2: “They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.” Clearly people can get to a state where they think their evil is actually good. See, consider the Pharisees. They encountered God in the flesh and rejected Him. They crucified Him. Did they think in their hearts, “This is wrong, we shouldn’t do this”? Maybe at some level, but their stated reason was, “We’re protecting the nation from a political revolt. We’re protecting the nation from deception. We’re making sure this dangerous wizard is put to death!” They probably thought they were still the guardians of righteousness. How did they get there? It no doubt started with a neglect of that personal vulnerability before God. They were experts at religion and ritual, but strangers to relationship. Jesus told them they were like white sepulchers on the outside, but dead on the inside. Then, they got to the point where they were proud. Their religious knowledge, their position had puffed them up. They no doubt taught on humility, but were far from it. Because of this pride, they could not receive correction. They rejected Jesus words and rebukes outright. When the blind man healed by Jesus corrected them, their pride is evident: “They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out.” John 9:34. Finally, they saw everything they did as being sanctified by God. Since they were full-time servants of God, they assumed that God knew their actions were all for him.

But their actions were unbiblical, and though they had the Word, their self-righteousness was so entrenched in them, they could not see it. The second and third stages are comfortable partners. Because I begin to see others as flawed in their evaluation of me, it follows that I cannot rely on anyone else to understand my actions. But then, I can console myself by saying, God understands. God sees, God knows. I’m not a law unto myself, I am accountable to God. If you think you can be accountable to God and not man, pride has cast a thick cataract over your spiritual eyesight.

Once again, there is the skin of a truth stuffed with a lie. “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord” That’s the truth. We serve God. We answer to Him. No man can judge us finally or absolutely, God is our judge. But how careful we must be that we do not become a law unto ourselves. How some twist this teaching into a backup for being cruel and ungodly, and then say ‘I’m not looking for popularity with people!! I follow God!’ Sounds honourable, but if you are hearing the words of Spirit-filled believers saying you are wrong, and you continue, you are on the road to self-destruction. How sad that so many spiritual leaders trample over people and then say, “My conscience is clear before God, I answer to Him.” If you are causing others to stumble, and calling it obedience to God, the Word indicts you as a liar.

Don't blame God for your disobedience. Don't call Him as a witness to condone disobedience. You may say He supports you, but that will be an added thing to answer for at the Judgement. How God will call to task those who claimed His involvement in their disobedience.

How do I avoid this?

- 1) Make sure you truly are willing to wait in the presence of God for conviction. Don't run.
- 2) Find people who are familiar with you and grounded in the Word, and ask them to evaluate you. Start slow; explain to them what you want. Be careful of selecting people who will always flatter you. At the same time, don't think that because you don't want yes-men you have humbled your heart to receive correction. Real humility is to be vulnerable before others, not fighting them with a satanic self-defensiveness.
- 3) Be careful of excusing your actions as obedience to God. I think it is one thing I never want to answer for, to say before others that I was following God when I hurt them, tell them my conscience is clear, and then find out one day that God was not in it, and that He was convicting me, but my conscience was seared. The key is, follow all of Scripture. If there is an area you are weak in, tell others, "I am weak here. Be patient with me, and help me." I don't know a godly believer who will not respond to such humility with compassion and patience.

Self-righteousness. It is the dangerous anesthetic that dulls our conscience to the Spirit's conviction. It starts by refusing to be vulnerable before God. It continues by refusing to be vulnerable before others by living in subtle pride, disqualifying people from rebuking you. It lands up finally being accountable to no one and claiming that God is behind you. All the way, there are Biblical truths that are twisted are taken to extremes till they become lies. God help you and me to have broken, humble and contrite hearts, before God, and before other believers.