

Bible Study

Deliverance from Self-Righteousness

(edited transcript)

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The Lord is re-orienting us at the most fundamental level from the deception of thinking we have the capacity to process what God is saying to us and that mere belief in Him is enough.

Speaking from testimony, not theology

Our witness in the world is to speak from testimony and not from the rightness of theology, because our testimony embodies the fruit that's been borne from the word. Jesus told His disciples that by their fruits people would be known, not by their theology (Matthew 7:16), and warned them not to be like the Pharisees, whose theology was pretty good up to a point but who were only whitewashed sepulchres who proved to be of the spirit of antichrist.

We see the same problem right across church history. Just because we believe what God has said does not mean there is righteousness in us.

Rather, righteousness comes to us from God. It is not of ourselves.

Some of us were taught that righteousness, right-standing before God, consisted simply in believing in Him. But that is a damningly dangerous self-righteousness! 'Because of my beliefs I'm now righteous and have right standing before God.' But that is not what righteousness is.

A person's righteousness is the whole activity and expression of the life that God, by His grace, is giving to them. We do not have that within ourselves. It is not virtuous merely to believe. The devils believe, and tremble (James 2:19). It achieves nothing to stand on what I believe as if what I believe makes my actions sanctified and righteous.

Many people criticise Christians for fighting, arguing and being more hypocritical than anybody. The criticism is true if all we are establishing is our self-righteousness, which is the work of our flesh and embodies all its worst elements. True righteousness can only come to us as a gift, for we can never obtain it unless God gives it to us. And He gives it to us as we are actively joining the work of the precious blood of Christ.

The *work* of His precious blood is not the *event* of His precious blood, which anyone can read about in world history as if it were an event like the German invasion of Poland in 1939. But believing that historical events happened doesn't change your life, even if you believe

they happened with all your heart and speak accordingly.

Only God knows the human heart

Believing with our heart is a big thing. How much do we know about the human heart? Across the mass of humanity, or the people we work or live with, or even just ourselves, how much do we really know about why we do what we do and how to fix what goes wrong? You and I are as complex as the whole universe. Quantum mechanics has nothing to compare to the complexity of the human heart. It is delusional to think we understand all the motivations of our complex hearts.

Unless God does something unique in us, and continues to do so, understanding is not possible. We can never get to the end of a person, can we? We don't even know what composes thought, or how it's communicated. We don't know how we love, or how we feel and show affection. Science has no explanation for the mysterious attraction between electrons moving around a nucleus; to the reason electrons absorb and emit light, move around and change their behaviour under observation. All our scientists can say is, 'We don't know why that happens.' And that is all we can say.

We need God to work on, change and rearrange our hearts so that we are truly righteous. We can't do it ourselves by saying, 'I believe the right things, so I have it all sorted.' That is self-righteousness and the natural default of human beings because we want to be in control; we want to believe we have integrity.

We don't like anyone telling us we have no integrity, but although we are unaware of the fact, we really *don't* have integrity. God does not receive us based on what we believe and

who we think we are. He certainly loves us, but He has to do His work in us so that we are born of Him and become His sons who attain by degrees to the glory of God as we walk in His purpose and plan for our lives, obtaining testimony of His life in us. With our hearts we believe for the righteousness that comes from God and becomes our expression and testimony as sons of God (Philippians 3:9). This testimony is true and the reality of our lives because we are joined to the fellowship of Christ's offering, which is the real work of righteousness.

Surrender to be led

The work Jesus accomplished was completed in such a way that any who will come to Him may access that finished work as though it were happening today. If we want to grow up as Christians, you and I are going to have to stretch out our hands to Him and surrender, just like a criminal surrendering to the police in what can be, if they will allow it, the first step in their recovery. 'That's it. I give up. I'm done. Cuff me.' If we insist on remaining unbound, refusing to be led where we do not want to go, we will never grow up (John 21:18).

It's interesting that after His resurrection, Jesus said to Peter, who had already followed Him for three and a half years, 'Follow me' (John 21:19). Haven't we, as Christians, also followed Him all these years? But we never knew about our self-righteousness, did we? Peter could well have thought and responded to Jesus, 'Now just a minute! I was led for three and a half years. I listened to you, I went with you to the Mount of Transfiguration. I went *everywhere* with you. I was led.' But what was Jesus asking of Peter, and of us? Where is He wanting to lead us? To come to Him in Gethsemane to pray, and from there to come with Him along the pathway of

the sprinkling of His blood, which is the pathway of triumph.

He always leads us in triumph (2 Corinthians 2:14)! But this pathway of triumph is not us getting hold of a belief system about the event of His crucifixion and then running off with it to try and validate what we think is good to do, using God to support the projects of our lives. The pathway of triumph is being led by Him, and with Him, on *His* pathway. Being led by Him means, 'Today, Lord, I'm in Your hands and I am submitting to what You are bringing to my life. I'm submitting to Your work so that You can circumcise the flesh out of my heart, just as You will.'

This word on His circumcision of our hearts has been pretty confronting for us. Paul uses two contrasting Greek words when he refers to circumcision. One involves a precise, neat cut, and the other, mutilation. Many of us would say that over the years we mutilated ourselves and others to try and deal with sin in our lives, which created a lot of mess in our families and in the church. A lot of unnecessary pain was inflicted trying to deal with the flesh that would not and could not stop doing what it was doing. It takes a precise circumcision from God (Colossians 2:11).

Testimony from a circumcised heart

Let me tell you of a tremendous testimony about such a circumcision from God that has taken place in another country, in an isolated region where the ordinary rule of law does not apply. There are no police there, and a payback system is the normal rule. The culture is one of revenge to the death.

A leader and warlord in that region had died, and a brother in one of our churches conducted the man's funeral, proclaiming the Gospel during the service. At the funeral was the dead man's successor who then took his place as a

leading warlord in this vengeful, murderous region. Recently, for reasons I don't know, the new leader turned up at a teaching gathering one of our churches in that country was conducting and heard one of the brothers speaking on the circumcision of Christ. He heard and believed this teaching and it began to change his life.

Subsequently, his 16-year-old son was sitting out in the open having a cup of tea with a friend whose bush knife was on the ground beside them when another young man, demonised and bent on revenge, rushed in, grabbed the bush knife and with awful strength hacked the son's head clean off his body.

How would the murdered boy's father, the leading avenger, respond in the face of his son's brutal murder? He had heard and believed the word that the circumcision of Christ could change his heart, but all his tradition, all his flesh and all his community would have been ready to strike the murderer so that justice would be served. He could have run with that ingrained spirit and let the payback run.

But he didn't do that. He took the initiative and told his family and people to stop; that he wasn't going to payback. Instead, he went to the young man who had murdered his son and told him there was to be no retribution because the Lord Jesus was circumcising all the murder from his heart. He knew that God was not punishing him, but that the Lord was circumcising the murderous spirit out of his heart even as his heart was breaking over the death of his son. The leader's word from the Lord to the young man who had killed his son was, 'You can live in peace.'

Can you see that as well as cutting something from this father's heart the Lord was also pouring in His love? There is no other way that man could have done and said what he did in

response to such horror. The word of God that had come to him and that he had believed became his testimony and the word of life and love he then proclaimed. Such testimony that is so much more than theological words is the testimony of the life of God that the Lord is wanting *us* to have.

A few nights after our friend lost his son and ministered the peace of God to his attacker, his wife woke up and heard him singing one of the songs he must have learned at the gathering where the Lord had spoken to him and he had received the word. 'I will greatly rejoice.' In the middle of his terrible agony, he was singing. When his wife asked him what he was doing, he told her, 'Our son is singing this song in heaven and I'm joining him.' So she stood and sang with him, joining the work that the Lord was doing in her husband.

These brethren are teaching us by their testimony, not by their theology. This man was not religiously saying or demonstrating, 'I'm such a good Christian I can forgive this man now that I believe and am righteous.' Imagine trying to meet this situation with your own righteousness! It would surely destroy you. No, our brother's testimony could only be, 'I had no strength. God had to and did supply all the righteousness'.

This is the Gospel.

We need this circumcision

It is no different for us. We may think we can mitigate sin and that we have or can access the resources we need to change ourselves and live righteously, but we don't. It's very sobering to hear this extreme testimony and imagine living through it ourselves, isn't it? Although what happens to us may not be as terrible as the suffering this father faced, we need to manifest

the same kind of spiritual response in our trials, because the stakes are very high.

God wants to deliver us of our angers, upsets, bad attitudes, lack of faith, blasphemies, horrible thoughts and whatever other sin besets us. We can't stop these things by trying to stop them because our self-righteousness in the attempt is self-defeating. We need the circumcision of Christ and the love of God poured in, and then *there* will be our testimony, just as there is already testimony among us.

This is the Gospel, and so much more than we were taught growing up. We knew *something* of the Gospel, but not the whole. We didn't know about the self-righteousness in us. We thought if we believed the Gospel, we were righteous, but we became more and more *unrighteous*. If we received the Holy Spirit we thought we were an upgraded Christian who now had the full Gospel, and then we became downright dangerous! But God is bringing us right back to the nature of Jesus' death for us: the death He died, He died to sin (Romans 6:10).

Our sin is utterly sinful

We need to know that sin, *our* sin, is utterly sinful. We can understand that in principle, as if sin is utterly sinful because it's bad. But how bad? A little bit? Moderately? Extremely? Are we referring to the sin we observe in the behaviour of people in the community? If we think of sin's sinfulness in any of these ways, we are only going to feed our self-righteousness because we will say, at some level, 'Thank God I'm not like them!' Like the Pharisees, we'll be in church proudly thinking, 'Thank God I'm not like *him*. I'm doing the right thing and I'm giving it my best shot. I might have a few faults but they're not that bad. At least *my* sins are not utterly sinful.' But that is our problem! If sin is utterly sinful in others, it is utterly sinful in me.

We can only know what righteousness is when we see the utter sinfulness of our own sin.

Our brother who lost his son knew whatever had been done to him was as bad as what he had done to others. He did not consider his sin justified and theirs utterly sinful. He knew his own sin was utterly sinful, embodied in the one who had killed his son just as he had killed others.

The Lord sometimes shows us the utter sinfulness of our sin by allowing it to come against us, clearly recognisable, in someone else. It's easy to see your sin when the same sin in someone else is beating the daylights out of you. But what will our reaction be? Will we cry, 'Unfair!' and play the victim? We tell other people not to live as victims, but are we living as a victim, not seeing that our own sin is utterly sinful because we are indulging our reactive self-pity? If anyone else were to indulge themselves like that we'd consider them selfish.

How are we going to be delivered from this? We can't deliver ourselves. We can't even see the layers or the root of the problem. We can't see how ridiculous and how wicked our self-righteousness is until He shows it to us.

Our testimony only emerges when His righteousness is being established in us; when we are no longer seeking to establish a righteousness of our own but the righteousness of Christ in us by faith (Philippians 3:9).

Wisdom, understanding and knowledge

King Solomon said:

"Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; ...Then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of God ...Wisdom is the principal

thing. Therefore, get wisdom and in all your getting, get understanding." (Proverbs 2: 2,5; 4:7)

Wisdom, understanding and the knowledge of the Holy One are three dimensions of the word of life that are essential to living as covenant believers. All three elements assume the fear of the Lord, and the fear of the Lord is our foundation as He deals with us and chastens us as His sons for our peace. We begin to understand the fear of the Lord as we begin to understand how much it cost the Lord to do what He did for each one of us; as we each begin to see that His suffering and dying was for *my* garbage.

There was a lot happening in the Godhead in the offering of Christ. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit were serious about sin and knew that your sin and mine were utterly sinful. So then, why do we downgrade the completely awful nature of our sin by insisting that because we believe Jesus died for our sins and we tell Him we're sorry, we're now fine?

The wisdom that is with the Lord, the wisdom of the Lord, is proclaimed from a presbytery in fellowship with Him, where God gives His gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8). There is a sure context in which the wisdom of God is made available for us all. If anyone thinks that by having a Bible and interpreting the words of the Scriptures they have the wisdom of God, they will only have what they make of the words and they are in danger of walking in the wisdom that is from beneath (James 3:15). But God gives us His wisdom that comes down from above through those He has given to His body. That is why He has put such men as gifts in His body, proclaiming His word, just as Paul explained:

"We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the ages for our glory." (1 Corinthians 2:7)

A good example of the wisdom of God proclaimed to us is the word concerning the circumcision of Christ. Many of us had read about His circumcision but had not the faintest clue what it meant until He spoke to us. In the same way, before God proclaimed it to us, none of us knew we had another law within us causing so much trouble. We didn't know we were self-righteous or what self-righteousness even looked like. We thought self-righteousness consisted in people pompously going about conquering others with their own goodness, not knowing it was us.

But when the word was proclaimed to us from the presbytery, faith began to come, and then testimony. Those who feared the Lord spoke to one another in testimony (Malachi 3:16), thereby receiving the wisdom of God and bearing the fruit of His wisdom in their lives.

The Apostle John described this wisdom as the Word of Life from the beginning which had been heard, seen, looked upon and handled (1 John 1:1). That hearing, seeing, touching and handling first happened in the Apostles' fellowship and was then proclaimed. It was no random or independent initiative that took them to this city or that, proclaiming the Gospel. No one went about 'doing their own thing'. There was a fellowship, a presbytery, in which they who believed and feared the Lord spoke to one another and from there, called others to believe and join that fellowship.

Some believed and joined their fellowship with the Lord and some didn't. Some believed but instead of joining, they remained carnal, giving rise to factions and self-righteous arguments.

The real battle is between Spirit and flesh

Carnality was the issue Paul dealt with everywhere he went - calling Christians to walk in the Spirit and not after the flesh. He wasn't

trying to teach them that Jesus died for their sins.

It is the same in church life today. The battleground is not belief or unbelief that Jesus died and rose 2000 years ago. It's walking by the Spirit or by the flesh. It's the same battleground in our homes and our relationships. We may not even recognise it, because carnality is in the very fabric of our being and we think it's righteousness. 'I was taught that. I'm invested in it and in the way I live because of it. I've got years of good experience and you're mistaken if you're telling me it's all wrong and I've got to go back and start again.' But that would be better than continuing down a path that doesn't lead to life, wouldn't it?

Change is needed, and, like Peter, we have to be led where we don't want to go. None of us will get through the perilous times that are now upon us if we refuse the change the Lord is proclaiming to us. What does it matter how many angels fit on the head of a pin? What does God want to do? What is His purpose? He wants to build His church according to His pattern.

We are living now in very barren times, but don't be discouraged because of that. God is doing a work and is preparing His people, just as He has always done and will continue to do. If we just stick with Him, we are not going to be put to shame, and we can rejoice.

Wisdom from above coming down to us

The wisdom of God is the light of present truth as it is coming to us, illuminating our path. His wisdom is not just words written in the Bible, it is His light for our path today. The light of His word to us this morning is that we can be delivered of our self-righteousness. As a group of people who are the sheep of His pasture, we

needed this light of His wisdom today, so we can go in and out of His sheepfold, find pasture, grow and multiply; so we can be established in the culture of the fear of the Lord instead of doing what is right in our own eyes.

The wisdom of God is ministered directly to every individual and household through the public and house-to-house proclamation of the word of life by those with ascension-gift grace who are part of the presbytery that Christ is holding in His right hand (Revelation 1:20). This proceeding word is proclaimed and poured out upon us as a gift by the Lord so that we can walk in His ways, illuminated by His wisdom. Receiving Christ's word of present truth as it is proclaimed by His ascension-gift messengers will be the primary initiative of every son and daughter of God who recognises that the wisdom of God is the principal thing.

This wisdom is not found in systematically working through the Bible every few years. It is found in hearing the word of present truth, now. Walking with God is dynamic, moving and never static. Sons and daughters of God recognise that His wisdom coming down from above is the bread of life by which we live (Matthew 4:4). This is the bread we are breaking at communion today.

This bread, the wisdom of God coming down to us, defines the works of our sonship. It establishes the ground of fellowship and offering in the presbytery and therefore in the church. Those in the presbytery are being dealt with by the Lord at least as severely as anyone else on all matters that the word is proclaiming, and are finding as much joy in testimony as anyone else hearing the word. They suffer first for the word they are called to bring, and they testify and rejoice with us in its fruit.

Receive wisdom and buy understanding

The Scriptures teach that understanding is a wellspring of life. The Psalmist prayed:

"...give me understanding and I shall live."
(Psalm 119:144).

We need understanding so we can live and walk in the light of the word that we have received, and having received the wisdom of God in this way, we are urged to get understanding though it cost us all we have (Proverbs 4:7).

The word of present truth is coming so that we can find faith and understanding, but how do we do this? In fellowship with one another. That is why we meet house-to-house; why we are encouraging everyone to invite people over, to pray together and talk about the word, seeking to understand what the word means. This is how we live, encouraging and exhorting one another publicly and from house to house (Acts 5:42, 20:20).

If receiving God's wisdom involves humbling ourselves and receiving His word of present truth, then understanding involves buying the word that we are receiving. To find wisdom we need to humble ourselves, and to gain understanding we need to purchase the word at a price. This explains why it is not enough to just hear the word, for if we only hear without buying, we won't understand what we're doing (Revelation 3:18). We'll become 'experts' about things we're not living, which sets us up in a dangerous delusion. We could even be teachers and ministers of the word but never understand and be blind to what we are teaching and ministering.

"...I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire ...and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore, be zealous and repent"
(Revelation 3:18-19)

There is a price to pay to buy the word, just as Jesus advised the Laodiceans. He likened the price of buying the word of God to hidden treasure that a man finds in a field, buries there and for joy over the treasure he's found, goes and sells everything he has so he can buy the field (Matthew 13:44). The hidden treasure is the secret of the Lord, and when we have purchased His secret we will have peace.

We purchase His secret by joining Christ, not by merely observing the wonder and the majesty of what He did. Paying the price for the word means joining the fellowship of Christ's offering. To be found in Christ, we must sell or let go of everything we use to validate ourselves and our ministries as sons of God.

You mightn't think you have a ministry, but this just means your service and your activities, which could include your self-defined initiatives, qualifications, experience, traditions and so on. Like Paul, we are to count them all as dung in view of knowing Christ and being found in Him (Philippians 3:8). That sounds simple and even very noble, but to find that treasure you will first have to purchase the truth of it. In purchasing it you will understand what it really means. You can rejoice initially in the wisdom of it, but your understanding of it will only come at cost.

This is what it means to follow Christ, forsaking all others, even people from whom the Lord may divide you for His sake. If you like being popular, that can be a really hard thing. Sometimes we have to let people go who oppose God's Lordship in our lives.

We must understand that suffering is part of the purchase price, but God helps us in all these difficulties, which are not about pain and misery but the prize of knowing Him and the joy of serving Him.