

SELF JUSTIFICATION

He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts." (Luke 16:15 NIV)

Everybody, I suppose, would like to be justified, but not everybody seeks to be justified in the same way. Some seek justification from men, and others from God. The Scriptures seem to suggest that it is an "either, or" situation. You cannot do both. Paul wrote that if he tried to please men he could not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10). Men's opinions vacillate and vary but Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Striving to please Christ gave Paul stability and confidence in life and also in death. Those whose goal in life is to please men are beset with constant insecurity. Worse than that, they are giving up something they cannot lose for something they cannot keep. Such behavior is life's ultimate absurdity. It is God, not men, who will someday determine where we spend eternity.

There are at least two reasons why the justification of men breeds insecurity. First, human accolades are invariably short lived. Jesus, for example, was praised on Sunday by the very people who crucified Him on Friday. Secondly, rational people recognize that they are imperfect, and live in fear that someone is going to find out. Like actors on the stage they bluster and pretend, but in their heart of hearts they know better. When challenged, they cannot admit their imperfections, for to do so would jeopardize their means of salvation. Adam and Eve suffered from the same problem. They were naked but wouldn't admit it. That's why they made aprons of fig leaves and tried to appear like someone they were not. Jesus met the same kind of people and said they were like whitewashed tombs. On the outside they were beautiful, but within they were full of dead men's bones and everything unclean (Matt. 23:27).

Paul warned of the same problem by writing of those who gloried in appearance (2 Cor. 5:12) Such people are invariably shallow and superficial. How could they be otherwise, their thinking is focused only on temporal things. God, however, is not fooled by their fig leaves. While man can only look upon the outward appearance, God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). He knows our thoughts from afar and understands our every word before we speak it (Ps. 139: 1 - 16). His judgment will be just no matter how we "appear" to our fellow men.

Those who seek to justify themselves in the eyes of men are also characterized by argumentation. Since they equate their appearance with their salvation, they fight for their reputations like a drowning man struggles for another breath of air. The Scriptures classify such conduct as the works of the flesh. Some of these "works" are listed in Gal. 5:19 - 21) Note that discord and debate are in the same list with idolatry and witchcraft. The Greek word translated as debate, discord, and contention, is "eris". Such behavior is so contrary to the Christian life that we are admonished in Phil. 2:3 never to do anything through "eris". Rather in lowliness of mind each person is to consider others better than themselves. Can you even imagine debate and discord where each person considers others better than themselves?

By contrast, those who depend upon God for justification do not need to debate. If God is right they can afford to be wrong. If Jesus Christ is their covering they do not need to make aprons of fig leaves. Such people are described in Scripture as pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (James 3:17). This wisdom comes from above and brings harmony with both God and men.

Jesus summarized it beautifully when he likened Himself to the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness (See John 3:14 - 18). Those who lifted up their eyes and trusted in that serpent lived. Those who lowered their gaze and trusted in themselves died (Nu. 21:9).

True justification does not depend upon "our" righteousness but "His". Since Jesus has been 'lifted up' we can look to Him for deliverance. We can depend upon Him for salvation. All of our righteousness is like filthy rags, but when clothed in His righteousness we are without a spot, wrinkle or any such thing. Being justified by faith, we can now have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Praise God! There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).