From Fig Leaves to Fur Coats

“Good little boys go to heaven and bad little boys don’t!” is one of the greatest conceptual heresies today. Probably most of us at one time or another have undergone the ordeal of having a Sunday school teacher point a bony finger at us and carp away at our inappropriate conduct, warning us of the ultimate outcome of such behavior.

This Santa Claus mentality suggests that God is “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice,” to “find out who’s naughty or nice.” The conclusion we are supposed to reach is that our good deeds and our bad deeds are being placed on the divine scales and will be weighed at the tine of our physical death to see if we go “up” or “down.” This suggested approach to God is diametrically opposed to that which Jesus affirmed as the right approach.

The most righteous men of Jesus’ day were the Pharisees. In order to be a Pharisee, you had to be “Mr. Clean.” The Pharisees knew the Old Testament by heart. They went to the synagogue three times a day, and prayed seven times a day. They were respected in the community. But Jesus looked right through their religious veneer and exposed their spiritual bankruptcy to the thronging crowds with such statements as, “Except your righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter the Kingdom of God”(Matthew 5:20).

“The crowds responded by staring at each other in bewilderment: “You mean the Pharisees aren’t righteous enough to make it? If they can’t make it, who can?”

What a moment in history! A radical young man dares to suggest that the most righteous and moral men of the ancient Jewish community are not righteous enough to make themselves presentable before God. In fact, Jesus said they were hypocrites! He informed them they were wrong to claim they

were righteous enough to assume that all was well between them and their Maker. When you are well, you don't need a doctor. The time to consult a physician is when you realize you are sick.

Jesus was pressing the Pharisees to be honest with themselves when He said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13).

A Mildewed Fig

When the word "sin" comes up in a conversation, most people look as though someone just slipped them a mildewed fig! Most of us don't know what sin really is, nor do we understand what a sinner is. A sinner is one who has violated the law of God.

Many assert that they try to live by the Ten Commandments, or by some other rule of life. And yet, if we are honest, each of us discovers that we have violated these standards at some point. These codes of behavior are to us what an X-ray machine is to a broken arm. The machine reveals the condition of the arm, but it will not set and knit the bones, nor will it put the arm in a cast. By the same token, the Ten Commandments can only *reveal* to us the condition of our lives; they cannot heal us of sin.

The Pharisee looked at the Law and then at his life and said, "I'm well." Jesus desired them to come up with exactly the opposite conclusion. A person must know he needs help before he will seek it. Everyone has this sin disease. Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that there is no good at all in humans. There is a great deal of good. The point is merely that this relative human goodness is unacceptable to God.

In Russia they print and circulate rubles, and with those rubles you can buy your dinner, pay your hotel bill and buy things in the shops. But if you took those rubles across the Atlantic Ocean and brought them to America, they would be

worthless currency.

Debased Coinage

So it is with our characters, our lives. . . all that we have outside of Christ. A person may be a millionaire in character, and that might buy him a high position in this world, but when he crosses the great divide between this life and the next, his character is a debased coinage, and God in His Holiness cannot accept it at all.

It is important than individual comprehends the fact that there are *two* kinds of righteousness. There is a righteousness of men, and a righteousness of God. The apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee, finally recognized these two distinct types of righteousness when he said that the desire of his life was to "be found in Him, not having my *own* righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Philippians 3:9).

He saw clearly the predicament of his Jewish brethren when he wrote with a broken heart to the Romans, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for god, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of *God's* righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:1-4).

Failing "Home Economics 101"

In the Old Testament account of Adam and Eve, there is a vivid imagery of these two kinds of righteousness. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, they hid in the bushes in shame. They took out needle and thread, and began sewing fig leaves together to clothe themselves with some kind of garment or covering. God came walking in the cool of the garden, desiring

His regular fellowship with them, but Adam was in the bushes with Eve. . .flunking the first home economics course ever offered! God looked at the flimsy, pathetic clusters of fig leaves which had been hastily sewn together by the guilty couple, and in short, thoroughly censored their effort.

The account goes on to say that God took animals and made garments from their skins for Adam and Eve. While morality and human goodness are to be commended, God makes it clear from the very beginning that man, in his own efforts, does not have the ability to make himself presentable before God.

It was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said "Man is basically a silkworm. A spinner and a weaver… trying to clothe himself … but the silkworm's activity spins him a shroud."

So it is with man. Philosophy, philanthropy, asceticism, religion, ethics, or any other system which seeks to gain the approval of God is the "fig leaf" approach. This was the error of those fellow Israelites for whom Paul grieved, those who were trying to establish their own righteousness, without recognizing that another kind of righteousness was available them by faith: ". . .and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, lest any man should boast"(Ephesians 2:8,9). "Works" righteousness is what religion is all about. Works righteousness is spelled **"DO!"** "Faith" righteousness is what Christianity is all about. Faith righteousness is spelled **"DONE!"** Jesus cried triumphantly from the cross, "It is finished!" The work which the Father had given Him to do was completed at the cross. A bridge, a way of access—by His sacrificial death—had been constructed between God and man, and it was now open for business.

That is why the cross is so important to each individual. If one can find God through his own efforts and good deeds, then God made a terrible mistake at Calvary. He allowed His Son to die a substitutionary death for the world that was not truly needed. The choices of approaching God are then left to each

person. One can accept the death of Christ on his behalf, or he must pay with his own death. How presumptuous for anyone to think himself qualified to provide salvation for himself when the standard each must meet is God's perfection. Who can match that? It is a goal so far away that no one can reach it. The Grand Canyon is 6 to 18 miles across, 276 miles long, and one mile deep. The world's record in the long jump, set by Mike Powell at the 1991 Olympics, is 29′ 4 ".

Yet the chances of a man jumping from one side of the Grand Canyon to the other are greater than the chance of a man establishing fellowship with God through his own efforts.

A "God-Original"

What God has to offer is *free*. It is a gift which is not deserved by any man, nor could any man ever *repay* what the gift is worth. Man has been dealt with in grace and love. The only thing that man is asked to do is acknowledge that he has broken the laws of God, to acknowledge that God made things right through His son at the cross, and accept His forgiveness.

He is requested to lay aside his own fig-leaf garment and to be clothed with a "God-original" garment made possible by the slaying of the Lamb. God wants to clothe every person with the righteousness of *Christ.*

This is what Jesus was referring to in a parable concerning a wedding feast which a king was having for his son: "So the servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, *both good and bad:* and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man who had not on a wedding garment. And he said unto him, Friend, how come you are here not having a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then said the King to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be

weeping and gnashing of teeth!'" (Matthew 22:1-13).

In a society where the hue and cry is "take it off¾take it all off," it is ironic that God is saying the very same thing. He does not want us to cover ourselves—to hide what we really are. He wants us to acknowledge what we are and accept with a thankful heart what He has provided in Christ.

As a gracious Host, He stands there holding the most costly garment in the universe—the righteousness of Jesus Christ—and He eagerly desires to wrap *you* up in it, safe and warm and happy and secure:

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isaiah 61:10)

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