

# Self-Righteousness

By Karen Muilenburg

## Introduction

During our last Common Grounds, I was reminded of times in my life when it seemed God wanted me to know that He could not move forward with me until I was willing to see my sin of self-righteousness. And ever since Linda Anderson asked me to do the devotional for this gathering, **on** self-righteousness God in His graciousness has been shining His light on my heart showing me almost moment by moment that self-righteousness is still alive and so, I thank you Linda for asking me to speak. It has shown me again that there is One who loves me too much to let me be complacent about the sin that so easily ensnares me. (Hebrews 12:1)

You may not practice self-righteousness in the same ways that I do and you may not struggle in this area, but I invite you to look with me at the ways self-righteousness can raise its ugly head and hopefully to talk about some solutions.

## I. A Definition of Self-Righteousness and Righteousness

A. I think it would be easier to look at self-righteousness if we first look at what righteousness is.

B. The Hebrew word for righteousness is *tseh'-dek* (*Gesenius's Strong's Concordance*) it means: *righteous, integrity, equity, justice, straightness*

It comes from the root word *tsaw-dak* meaning: *upright, just, straight, innocent, true, sincere*

C. In the book Bible Doctrine, Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith by Wayne Grudem (from Mike Andrews) it says:

*"God's righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right."*

D. Self-righteous is defined in Webster's dictionary this way:  
*"filled with a conviction of being morally superior to others; smugly virtuous"*

- E. Since Romans 3 tells us *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”(23)*, and *“There is none righteous, no, not one”(10)*, I have to conclude that if I practice self-righteousness I am missing something that God really wants me to know about Himself and our relationship.

## II. Ways I practice Self-Righteousness

Let me share with you some of the ways I practice self-righteousness

### A. Comparison to others

- I have this horrible desire to be like the Pharisees and trust in my ability to follow a list of rules, “do’s and don’ts.” And when I don’t practice that list perfectly, I compare myself to others so that I don’t look so very bad, or do I?
- In fact, I’m sure I am not seeing others or myself too clearly since there is a very large, hypocritical plank in my eye (Lk 6:42)
- That was the case in my marriage. Some of you know that Ralph and I separated after 25 years of marriage. After years of financial stress and troubles in our marriage, Ralph and I found it difficult to keep our relationship close. He began to drink too much, more and more frequently. I felt insecure. I tried to fix things. We talked to pastors, went to counseling, I went to Al-A-Non. I asked God what I should do – Through His Word and through His people He seemed to say, “Karen, you stay **close** to Me. **I** am your strength. **I am** in charge here.” I would cry and get so angry. Ralph seemed to be on a path of self-destruction and it hurt too much to watch it. As our family descended into chaos, I asked God’s permission to separate from Ralph. This was an incredibly painful time for our family and everyone close to us. We learned first-hand what happens when you tear apart the one flesh that God had joined together.
- As much as I wanted reconciliation, God had some work to do in my heart. Early one Sunday morning, I was reading Isaiah 6 and was struck with how prideful I had

become. I had been thinking how well I'd been doing – managing money well, taking care of Katy and providing a home for us. Forgetting that the Lord had been my provider was bad enough, but even worse – I had been enjoying being the “good one” while Ralph was the “bad one.” The Lord confronted me with my sin. And I had an incredibly strong sense of how holy God was and how unholy I was. I knew what Isaiah meant when he said, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.” Of course, I had not seen a vision of the LORD but my awareness of his holiness demanded repentance. I knew God wanted me to humble myself or He would do it for me. I was grateful and in awe that such a holy God cared about my relationship with Him. God also certainly wanted us to be reconciled, because that same Sunday, Ralph showed up at church after an absence of 3 years. But that is Ralph's story. For those of you who don't know us, we were reconciled and have been back together for almost 3 years now. Ralph has stopped drinking and we are doing really well. A lot of you who saw us through that time are in this room and I thank you for your support.

B. Another way I practice self-righteousness is by saying, “Well, I did the best I could.”

- Usually I say this when I know very well that I did **not** do the best that I could, and if I point it out first, then maybe I'll escape condemnation. But, what is the motive of my heart?
- Jer 17:9-10 tells me “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it? I the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”

C. And one more example: Aren't girlfriends great?!

I don't think there is anything more fun than intimate conversation with my girlfriends. But what about when we talk

to each other about other friends who aren't there? We are confident that we could really "help" with the way they are raising their kids or improve their marriage if they would just do it the way we would do it? Sometimes I leave feeling like I just took a big bite out of someone I really care about. And what I should have done is gone to that person, come alongside with encouragement from God's word, and asked if I could be praying with them. That's what I would want from a trusted friend.

- Gal 5:14-15 tells me, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another."

### III. What are some solutions for self-righteousness?

- Since I am convinced that my self-righteousness is a flimsy mockery of the real thing, I cannot help but want something authentic, something I can trust in.
- I rejoice with Isaiah when he says, "For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness." (Is 61:10) I would rather exchange my filthy rags of righteousness (Is 64:6) for the garments God has picked out for me to wear.
- It helps me to remember that I must be a faithful steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1) and there are unbelievers watching me, watching the church. Surely, they hear our conversations. In fact, I brought the lyrics to a song that listens in on what they think we are saying about them.
- I want to be like Mary, who chose the one thing that is needed: to sit at Jesus' feet and hear His word, the word that first brought me into a right relationship with God.
- 1 Cor 5:20-21 gives me assurance. "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For he made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

#### IV. Conclusion

- Maybe you have found yourself slipping into self-righteousness. Or maybe you have never come to the understanding that God is perfectly holy and that you can never be good enough to satisfy Him. Well, God has some good news for you. He also loves you very much. So much in fact that He sent His only perfect sinless Son, Jesus Christ to die on the cross; To take your place and mine, to take our sins on Himself and satisfy a holy God's perfect justice. You and I only have to receive that free gift and God will give us eternal life.
- Let's all close our eyes and talk to God. God, we know we cannot live up to your holy standard. I ask for all who have trusted in Jesus to let Your Holy Spirit help us apply Your word to our lives.
- God, I also ask if there is anyone here who may have come to that place when they want to accept Your gift of eternal life, the payment for their sin, who want to receive Your free gift of eternal life to pray with me:
- God, I know I am a sinner. I believe You sent Your Son Jesus to die on the cross to pay for my sin and today I want to accept that gift. Thank You. Amen.