

## “FILTERING OUT THE BAD IN ORDER TO DO THE GOOD”

Proper 17B August 30, 2009  
Deut. 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15;  
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

### **Introduction:**

Have you noticed there seems to be an inherent tension between the Old and New Testaments regarding the issue of Righteousness – or, Being Right With God – or, Holiness; however you want to define the issue. The Old Testament seems to present righteousness as resulting from our actions – do we do the things the way God commands, or not?

### **Examples From Today’s Lessons:**

For example, from today’s Deuteronomy lesson we read: *<sup>1</sup>Now, Israel, listen to the laws and commands I will teach you. Obey them so that you will live and so that you will go over and take the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving to you. <sup>2</sup>Don’t add to these commands, and don’t leave anything out, but obey the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.* The emphasis in this lesson, and throughout the Old Testament is our obedience to listen to what God is instructing and obey His laws and commandments. There is no overt mention of Grace. It is works oriented.

From Psalm 15, we are presented this same template but couched in a different language. The

## FILTERING OUT THE BAD TO DO THE GOOD

Psalmist begins by asking a question: *Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide upon your holy hill?*

The answer given is this: *Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right...* Pretty straightforward, isn't it? The Old Testament definition for how to acquire righteousness is to be blameless, always doing what is right. So, let's look at

### **The Obstacles To Leading a Blameless Life:**

The first obstacle for blamelessness is this: The difficulty of leading a blameless life is you have to live so perfectly that there is nothing anyone, including God, can legitimately blame you for. You have to be so perfect that you are blameless.

That is the major purpose of the Old Testament Law – to define what blameless means. Blameless is keeping the Ten Commandments perfectly; it is keeping all the laws, commandments, statutes, and ordinances of Leviticus, Deuteronomy, the Prophets, and the rest of the entire Old Testament – perfectly. It is having the will power, the discipline, the courage of your convictions to always resist temptation and never sin- not even once.

The second obstacle for achieving blamelessness is this: It is keeping the spirit of the law as

## FILTERING OUT THE BAD TO DO THE GOOD

well as the letter.

In the Gospels we read of the constant conflicts Jesus had with the super religious people, particularly the Pharisees. On the positive side, the Pharisees were totally committed to blameless living. They really worked at it. Some, like Saul of Tarsus, later St. Paul, even testified that they had achieved perfection in living their lives therefore according to the Law they were blameless.

On the surface, that is totally commendable – isn't it? At one level all of us should be blameless Christians. There shouldn't be anything that anyone could hold against us because our conduct would be so ... well, blameless.

What happened to Saul, what happened to the Pharisees that confronted Jesus, and what would presumably happen to us, is our blameless conduct would fill our inner self with an egoism that makes us obnoxious at best, and dangerous at worse. How dangerous?

There were Pharisees so filled with themselves that they were willing to credit the work of Jesus Christ to the Devil. Saul of Tarsus was so filled with the sense of his greatness that he was willing to murder, pillage, and destroy entire families because he was convinced he, and other religious leaders like him, possessed all the truth

## FILTERING OUT THE BAD TO DO THE GOOD

there was to glean. Their efforts to perfectly keep God's law produced destructive pride in their souls and lives.

Jesus tried to explain it to the Pharisees but in their self-righteous condition they refused to be taught. Jesus told them that the bar of excellence wasn't just outwardly keeping the Law; it was also having motivations and thoughts consistent with the Law they claimed to so understand.

For instance, they knew they were not supposed to murder anyone – and they didn't. However, Jesus pointed out to them that as far as God is concerned to secretly hate someone and wish that person dead, was the same as murdering them.

So, based upon self-acquired perfection,

### **Who Can Dwell In God's Tabernacle?**

Well, there would be God the Father. There would be God, the Holy Spirit; and, there would be Jesus. There would be the Angels who remained faithful to God and did not join the Devil's rebellion. There might be a few humans who did not die as infants and grew into a perfect adulthood. I don't have any names for you, but there might be some – don't you think?

Of course we would have to rule out Moses because he murdered a man and disobeyed God a

## FILTERING OUT THE BAD TO DO THE GOOD

couple of times during the Exodus. We'd have to rule out Abraham because he allowed fear to control him when he lied and acted deceitfully regarding his wife Sarah. I would also rule out Muhammad because he had the blood of hundreds on his hands. The same goes for David.

Solomon allowed the worship of many gods to come into both his household and the nation. Let's see, St. Paul was a murderer and destroyer of Christian homes. St. Peter was so weak and afraid that, three times, he denied even knowing Jesus. James and John were plotting high political office for themselves in the government they believed Jesus was going to establish; and, Judas stole money from the ministry's treasury, betrayed Jesus for money, and committed suicide.

Maybe Gandhi got it right – except Jesus was never his Lord and Savior; but maybe, other than that, he was a perfect man. God knows he suffered enough.

So, who do you want to nominate as a candidate for human perfection? Getting on the list is so tough it causes me to ask -

### **Why Did God Establish a Standard For Perfection That No One Can Achieve?**

I think the answer has a couple of layers to

## FILTERING OUT THE BAD TO DO THE GOOD

explore. The first layer is the proposition that God does want others in heaven. God is not a loner. God enjoys fellowship and family. We can see evidence for that in the design of humans. We too enjoy the company of others. We too seek fellowship and want to enjoy our families. So, God didn't make the standard of entrance into heaven so tough because He wanted to keep everyone out.

The second layer is that, in spite of wanting others to be in heaven, God is pure holiness. By its very nature, Holiness cannot co-exist with evil, and its manifestation – sin. So God established the standards reflected in the Old Testament to enlighten people what it takes to earn the right to be in heaven. The standard is so tough that virtually no one can achieve it. In fact, St. Paul – who once considered himself perfect according to God's Law – wrote to the church in Rome: *“all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”*

Well, it seems then that we have a terrible dilemma. God wants us to be in heaven but we can't live blameless lives and therefore have no chance to get there. So, how is this dilemma overcome?

### **God Has Overcome It Himself.**

God did for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

## FILTERING OUT THE BAD TO DO THE GOOD

God came to earth as a real human being and lived a blameless life. This is what Jesus did. The Bible says, *“though tempted in every way as we are, yet he sinned not.”* By living a blameless life, Jesus became righteous, holy, blameless – the same status as God in Heaven.

Now, here’s the good part. Jesus offered his blameless life as a substitution for our less-than-blameless selves. By dying on the Cross, Jesus paid the penalty for sin as God requires. The Bible says, *“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness for sin”.* Jesus traded his righteousness for our sinfulness. He takes our sin away from us and replaces it with his righteousness. It is the best deal in the world.

Not only does Jesus set us right with God, He also – through the Holy Spirit – clears our conscience of guilt and condemnation.

Through the further action of God, the bad in our lives is filtered out through the blood of Christ and our growing in the Fruit of the Spirit. Thus, we are then able to do the good we could not before achieve. Before receiving Christ in our lives we would do a legitimately good thing for someone else, and be “proud” of ourselves – we did good! The action was good, but the pride wasn’t. Now, in Christ, we feel a privilege that God has

## **FILTERING OUT THE BAD TO DO THE GOOD**

called us to be partners together in the Ministry of Reconciliation. We don't let pride in ourselves fill us. Now we are filled with a sense of awe and blessing because God has forgiven us and given us meaningful ways to please Him and help others. Our perspective changes as the Spirit works within us.

We sincerely desire to Build Bridges from Ourselves to Others, and to God. We fully anticipate that across those bridges Jesus might one day walk out of our lives into the lives of others. Then we are partners in Eternal Life. What a gracious God we serve.

When we come to share in the Eucharist we give thanks to God. As we participate in the Holy Communion we sign on for another week of partnership in this holy enterprise to which God has called us.

Amen? Amen!