

Worse than sin

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[0 : 00] Now there are some words in the prophecy of Isaiah in chapter 64 I'd like us to think about this morning.

Isaiah 64 and verse 6. All of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

These last words especially, all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. There is one thing worse than the sinner's sin and that is the sinner's righteousness.

Now that may seem a strange thing to say but it is in fact what this verse would teach us and also the passage that we read in Matthew's Gospel.

The sinner's righteousness, that is his own attempt at righteousness, his own righteousness is much worse than his sin. The sinner's righteousness is one of the greatest obstacles to the Gospel.

[1 : 31] The belief that God will accept us just as we are because we may have some things about us that we think are good enough for him to accept.

We may feel even that God is obliged to accept us because of those good or righteous things. Now of course we will be prepared to admit that we've got our faults.

Who hasn't got faults? We're not perfect. We're not perfect. No one is perfect. But we're basically good people. And there's something about us that will surely make us acceptable to God.

And of course we argue too there are so many good and decent people in the world. Not only in Christian countries but in other countries as well.

Surely God is not going to condemn all of these people who are basically good and decent. God's word says all our righteousnesses or all our righteous acts are as filthy rags.

[2 : 44] That's God's verdict not on our worst but upon our best. And it's only when we grasp God's verdict on our best that we begin to see the gravity of our situation and our desperate need of what Jesus came to do.

Now notice these words that we've looked at in Isaiah. They don't say all our sins are as filthy rags. That goes without saying. They say all our righteousnesses, all our righteous acts are as filthy rags. These things that we think should kind of counterbalance our sins. The good things about us. The things that should make us acceptable to God.

These are the things God says are as filthy rags. Now I'd like to really illustrate these words by looking at that passage that we read in Matthew's Gospel.

[3 : 58] Matthew chapter 23. Because if we think of that time when Jesus lived, there was a group of people who appeared righteous.

If there has ever been any group of people in the world who had a claim to have a self-made righteousness, it was surely the Pharisees.

Now it's difficult for us really to grasp this I think today because today the very word Pharisee is a word that is pejorative.

It's used as an insult. It's used in the sense that somebody's a hypocrite. They're a Pharisee. And we fail to realize how in their own day these were people who were considered righteous.

They were considered good people. They were considered the pillars of their society. They were the kind of people that others would have looked up to for example and for advice.

[5 : 05] And yet we see in this passage in Matthew 23, Jesus' devastating expose of them and their sins.

And we might say maybe not so much an expose of their sins, but an expose of their righteousness. Because that is really the heart of the matter as far as our text is concerned.

All our righteousness is a filthy rhyme. Well let's look at the expression then, all our righteousness, in the light of the experience of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were people who sought to practice what they believed was righteousness, what was good. We see it in three areas.

First of all, in the area of charity. They were people who were very concerned to do what was right as far as almsgiving was concerned.

[6 : 12] That is what we today would call charity, giving to those in need. We're told that by the Lord Jesus in this very Gospel, in Matthew chapter 6.

Now again, he draws a lesson from this, but the practice, the actual practice of charity by the Pharisees cannot be denied. In verse 2 of chapter 6 he says, So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men.

I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. Now Jesus does not deny that these men gave to charity.

In fact, reading between the lines of what we know about the Pharisees, they would have been very concerned to do what was right in that regard.

They would not neglect that duty to give to the poor and to those in need. The problem was not so much what they actually did, but why they did it and how they did it.

[7 : 25] So these were men who were concerned for charity. Now we live at a time in the history of our own society, when there is a tremendous concern for charity.

Now there is tremendous good about this. Because, putting it back in New Testament times, the poor people who received the money given by the Pharisees, they would have benefited from it. There is absolutely no doubt about that. That can't be denied. Whatever Jesus went on to say about the Pharisees, Jesus did not deny that the actual money that they gave would do good to the people who received it.

And of course it is good, tremendously good, that there should be such a concern for charity in our own day. And we have, we've had various national appeals through television and so on, things like Live Aid, and things then more recently like the telephone thing.

All these things, comic relief and all the rest of it. Now, we must recognise that all these things do good in themselves. That the giving of people, giving of money to people in need, is a good thing.

[8 : 42] No one is arguing with that. Jesus is not arguing against that. But, as we'll see, as we'll come on to see, there is a great danger in thinking that by doing something like that, not only are we maybe doing good to our fellow men, but we're winning some kind of favour with God.

In the sense that we will earn salvation. The Pharisees were very righteous in this sense of paying attention to their obligations to charity.

But then, secondly, they were very concerned in the area of morality, to stand for what was righteous. Now, unfortunately, we see this, unfortunately, as far as they're concerned, we see this more in the New Testament terms of their application of their standards of righteousness to others. But, by and large, we may argue the best of them would have applied these standards to themselves. For instance, we have Simon the Pharisee, at whose house Jesus was being entertained, where the sinful woman came in from the street.

Now, we don't know all the background of that woman, but obviously she was someone that Simon the Pharisee looked down upon as being disreputable, morally disreputable. And he thought that in his heart.

[10 : 14] Here is a sinner, and Jesus is welcoming her, allowing her to make a fuss over him, and so on. And he criticized Jesus because of that. But the point I want to bring out here is that this man, Simon the Pharisee, had moral standards.

He judged this woman according to those moral standards. Now, maybe many of these Pharisees, they didn't judge themselves too well by those standards.

But, we could argue, well, maybe there were some, like Simon the Pharisee, who did, who was morally upstanding and righteous. They were concerned about such things.

Many people today have such a concern also, as we see in our society, such a deterioration. And there are many things that worry people in our society, such as the spread of AIDS, and are making people think again of what they may just think of as traditional or Victorian value, as they're sometimes called.

No one would use the term Christian value now very much. But that's the kind of thing that they need. And perhaps, I don't know, we don't know what lies ahead, but perhaps we may see a return

to such a kind of emphasis upon righteousness and public morality.

[11 : 46] Jesus was concerned in his dealings with the Pharisees to show that in all their concern for such things, they were still missing the mark.

But the Pharisees were concerned not only for charity, also for morality. And, of course, supremely, they were concerned about religion. We see their righteousness very much in the religious area. Again, in Matthew chapter 6, we see how Jesus talks about their praying. Now, again, he draws a lesson from it, that his disciples were not to be like the Pharisees in the way that they did it. But Jesus did not dispute the fact that these men did pray. And they were very concerned to pray. And we see, too, in this very passage, in verse 23 of Matthew 23, Jesus says, You give a tenth of your spices.

What has been called the herbs of their back garden. Mint, dill, and cumin. They were so concerned in the practice of their religion, that not only were they concerned for prayer and the public aspect of worship and so on, they were also concerned about every little detail of what they considered to be religious.

[13 : 10] They were concerned about all the commandments of the Old Testament. And if it was something like tithing, well, they would work out in detail what the tithing, what the tenth was, right down to the very tiniest herbs or spices that they had.

And a tenth would be set aside for God, for God's work, for the temple, for the Levites, for the priests, for whatever. So again, Jesus does not deny that these men were religious.

He points out how punctilious they were in practicing their religion as they understood it. Now again, we're living at a time when there seems to be a revival of religion.

Not in the sense that maybe many of us have been hoping and praying for a revival of true Christianity, but a revival of religion.

In the sense that people are becoming interested again in religion in general. It may be different kinds of things.

[14 : 21] It may be sects. It may be Eastern religion. It may be New Age or the occult or whatever it may be, but there seems to be this turning away from a secular humanism or atheism, a turning back to some kind of religious value.

Now, God's word never denies that men are religious. Jesus didn't deny that the Pharisees were religious. And people may be very punctilious in their observance of what they consider to be religious.

But again, that ultimately is not what qualifies us for acceptance with God. All our righteousness, all our righteousness in all these different areas of life, the charitable area, the moral area, and in the area of religion, all our righteousness are as so we write, says the word of God.

God. Now, that may come to us on the face of it as an amazing statement, a surprising statement. And it no doubt came to people in Jesus' day as an amazing statement as he applied that statement to people like the Pharisees.

Because for his disciples and the crowds of people, the Pharisees were the pillars, the Pharisees were the people that everyone looked up to. But in Jesus' assessment, their righteousness was as filthy rags.

[15 : 59] And as he looks at us today, and as he looks not at our sins, our outright and out and out sins, but as he looks at our righteousnesses, his assessment is the same.

They are as filthy rags. Now let's think what that means. And again, in the context in which Jesus was speaking in Matthew 23.

Well, rags are things that are incomplete as items of clothing. Rags are torn bits of fabric.

They're really no use for clothing. So, what is being said here is that our righteousnesses are incomplete. That's the first part of it.

Now, we see, for instance, in Matthew 23, verses 23 and 24, something of this, we've just been referring to the tithing and the emphasis that the Pharisees laid upon tithing and giving a tenth.

[16 : 59] And that's commendable. And it's something that should be commended to every Christian, that they would consider that as a guideline for their giving to the cause of Christ in the world.

But the point is, these men were punctilious in their tithing, yet Jesus says, you have neglected the more important matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You see, Jesus says, go on doing what you're doing in regard to tithing. I have no objection to what you're doing. But, you have neglected other areas.

Your whole approach is unbalanced. You have laid all the emphasis on these things that are ultimately of less importance.

And you've neglected the weighty matters of the law, justice, the way that you would treat people fairly, mercy, the way that you should forgive people who have sinned against you, and faithfulness.

[18 : 04] Faithfulness even to wives whom the Pharisees were tended to divorce for the least thing. Faithfulness in all your dealing with people.

All these things, Jesus says, you have neglected. So, their righteousness, even when he makes allowances for what is good and what is acceptable in it, he says, it is totally incomplete.

So, it is just like rags. Pits and pieces of things that really are no good are really not going to provide a robe of righteousness for them. Then he says also that their righteousness is as filthy rags in the sense that it is contaminated.

Filthy rags. That's the expression used by Isaiah. And there are two parts to this. the first part is that there was an outward show about it.

The good things they were doing, the righteous acts they were performing, were done with an outward showiness. Verses 5 to 7. Everything they do is done for men to see.

[19 : 22] They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long. They love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogue. they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to a man call them rabbi.

Well, I think some of these words begin to hit home to us, do they not? Jesus could see that although these men in many areas appeared to be so righteous and did the right thing, they gave money to the poor, they prayed and so on.

Yet Jesus could see that in the doing of these things that were good in themselves, they were doing it out of wrong motives. They were doing it as an outward show to impress people.

It would be no use if they weren't being seen doing those things. That's why Jesus tells us in Matthew 6, when you give charitably, when you give to those in need, don't make a show of it.

Don't even know, let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. In other words, you're not to make a great deal of it, either for yourself or before other people.

[20 : 36] So Jesus criticizes the righteousness of the Pharisees because it was an outward show. Now I wonder, as we consider these words for ourselves, how much of the things that we consider to be are a good point, how much of them are contaminated by this truth, that we're doing them not because we're wanting to help other people, not because we're wanting to glorify God, but because we're wanting others to think well of us, and we're wanting others to treat us well.

That's the great filthiness that Jesus focuses in on here that makes their righteousness a filthy rhyme. And that's the thing that contaminates all that we may think that's good about ourselves, this filthiness of making things is an outward show to impress others.

In fact, the reality, Jesus says, was very different. In verse 25, he says, Woe to you, teachers of the law, and Pharisees, hypocrites, you clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

In other words, there was this outward show that impressed other people, that Jesus knew the heart. Man looks on the outward appearance, God looks on the heart.

We tend to be so impressed by the way people appear, and the things we see them doing, and the way they speak. And we know that others are impressed by those kind of things, so we go in that direction.

[22 : 25] But Jesus looks upon the heart, and as he looks at those men, he didn't just see this outward show, because it was a facade. Inwardly, there was this greed and self-indulgence.

He saw other aspects of their lives that totally contradicted this outward show. He saw Simon the Pharisee cleaning himself and seeming so self-righteous as he looked down on this sinful woman. So all his moral rectitude counted for nothing before God, because he considered himself righteous, and this one totally unrighteous.

In fact, he did not see his own sinfulness, self-centeredness, and self-indulgence. He didn't even see his own neglect of his guests, but Jesus had to gently point out that he had never welcomed him with a kiss.

He had never washed his feet. This woman had come in and had kissed his feet and washed them with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head.

[23 : 38] Simon the Pharisee stood condemned because, in his heart of hearts, he wasn't doing the things that appeared so righteous to others out of the right motivation for the glory of God, or even because those things were good in themselves, he was doing them because of what others would think of him, and because it would increase his own self-esteem as he looked down on others.

How much of our righteousness, how much of the righteousness of the world is like that? Not only is it incomplete, not only does it focus on little bits of what may be called righteousness out of God's law here and there, but it is contaminated, it's filthy, it's contaminated by our own sinfulness, our own greed, and our own self-indulgence, so that what we are left with is that filthy right.

And in all of this, the most terrible thing Jesus sees in the self-righteousness of the Pharisees was their opposition to the gospel, gospel.

We see it in verse 13, Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites, you shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces, you yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

What a terrible condemnation of the Pharisees' righteousness, that they were so sure of their own acceptedness with God, their own righteousness, righteousness, that they didn't see any need for the kingdom of God, which the Lord Jesus had brought.

[25 : 21] And not only that, not only did they refuse to enter themselves, but they shut the door in the faces of other people. They forbade others to come to Jesus and to follow him. And that's the final indictment against the sinner's righteousness, is it not?

not only does it make oneself feel that there is no need for this gospel of Jesus Christ, but it will even lead you to deny that to others.

So that there are parents who have that way of thinking, and they will do everything to stop their children becoming interested in the things of God.

God, and how many people in the churches, in the professing Christian church, so many teachers, so many preachers, so many professors, and not only are they shutting the door of the kingdom to themselves, they don't want it, they have an idea of their own humanistic righteousness, but they are stopping others from coming to that gospel and coming to the Lord Jesus Christ.

What an indictment Jesus lays here at the feet of the Pharisees and at the feet of all such. And then again in verse 34, Jesus develops that thought.

[26 : 43] He says, I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers, some you will kill and crucify, others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. In other words, they were going to continue to resist his love and the preaching of the gospel towards them.

So there is the final indictment of the filthiness of our righteousness. That not only does it not qualify us to be accepted by God, because it is totally contaminated by our sins, but it even goes so far as to reject the overtures of God's love to us in Jesus Christ, because we believe that we are all right. We can be accepted by God as we are. And Jesus has to give this devastating analysis and assessment of human righteousness here in Matthew 23, to make us realize that our righteousness will never qualify us for heaven.

It is contaminated that soul. And so we see Jesus' final verdict on human righteousness. In verse 33 he says, you snake, you brood of vipers, how will you escape being condemned to hell?

Now, that is not a question to which he is looking for an answer. He is there giving a rhetorical question. He is saying, how are you going to escape?

[28 : 18] There is no way of escaping. In your own way, in your own righteousness, there is one way of escape which he has come to bring, but they are not listening.

They are rejecting us. So, he gives his final verdict here, that our righteousness will condemn us. And that's the frightening thing, isn't it?

Yes, we might be prepared to accept that sin would condemn us. That evil, that crime, all these things, that would condemn us.

But we're hoping that there's this, on the other side, our good deeds, our righteousness, that that will somehow counterbalance and God will accept us. But Jesus says, our righteousness, our very righteousness, will condemn us.

All our righteousness is as filthy rags. How will you escape being condemned to hell? And so, we're left with the final pleading of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of this chapter.

[29 : 23] In the face of all that self-centered righteousness, Jesus has gone on pleading with Jerusalem. In verse 37, O Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stoned those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings.

But you were not willing. Jesus today reaches out to us, each one of us, and Jesus longing to gather us to him as a hen gathers her chickens.

And the great question is, are we willing? Or are we thinking that somehow God will accept us some other way? That when the time comes for us to die as come it will, and after death the judgment, that we will be able in some way to say to God you must accept us because of what we've done?

Utter foolishness, because all our righteousness is a filthy rag. How long will you go on resisting the love of the Lord Jesus Christ?

He stretched out his hands to Jerusalem so often to gather them to himself, and they went on resisting. and he stretched out his hands to you so many times, here in this church, after many other churches in different places, through Christian friends, or whatever, he has been reaching out to you.

[30 : 53] How long will you continue to resist that love? Will you lay aside your filthy rags, see them for what they are, and put on that full robe of Christ's righteousness?

For he alone has pleased God perfectly, he alone has lived the perfect life, and died the perfect death. All we are asked to do is to just slip it on like a robe, slip it on like a coat that will cover all our filthiness, and we will be accepted by God, not because of things we've done, but because of what Jesus Christ has done, and we've just accepted him, we've trusted in him, and we've clothed ourselves with his righteousness, that's what faith is.

So, will you not give up that resisting of Christ's love, and will you not accept him this morning as your saviour, and as the one who's able to provide a righteousness, which is perfect, and which will never be contaminated by sin, for he has established it, and he is at God's right hand, and he finally is the conqueror who will overcome all, and will draw sin and evil under his feet.

Will you not accept him, if you've not already done so, this morning, and know the release, not only from sin, but the release from your own poor attempt at righteousness, us, because of what he's done.

Let's pray. Our gracious and loving heavenly father, we pray that you would bless your own word to our hearts.

[32 : 48] May we be convicted by your word. May your holy spirit expose not only the things that we already know to be sin in us, but those things that perhaps up until now we thought were good about us.

Oh, help us to see that we are totally and utterly contaminated by sin, and help us to come to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is ever ready and willing to receive those who come to him, those coming, confessing that they are sinners.

Oh, gracious Lord, we pray for your blessing upon the preaching of this gospel today, that wherever it is made known that Jesus accepts sinners, through what he has done, that that message may be blessed, and men and women and boys and girls born again to a living hope, we pray that you would please remember us here, and all our loved ones and those for whom we may be concerned, that they too, would come to know this liberating, transforming power of Jesus Christ.

We ask all these things in his name and for his sake. Amen. Now we close by singing in Psalm 51 from the beginning to verse 7, the tune is Evan, number 59.

after thy loving kindness, Lord, have mercy upon me, for thy compassion's great, blot out all mine iniquity.

[34 : 35] Psalm 51, verses 1 to 7, to God's praise. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. sin and glory wash from my living way.

All I can treasure my God has, my sins I ever leave.

Get thee the only man I live in my sight of this hill.

[36 : 06] And where I love thee, come ready God, and clear the joy is there.

Behold, I echoe, For humble, oh, when My Father, I will come Enable and save with evilense with the hidden heart

Though thou wicked out-sprinkle me I shall be cleansed so Yet one shall be And then I shall be Why thou shalt and one more Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with each one of you now and forever. Amen.

You