

# Baptist hour messages



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## RIGHTEOUSNESS OR GOODNESS?

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All our lives we have been taught that to be right is the noblest of achievements. The Bible is replete with admonitions that exalt righteousness. To accomplish this purpose the Jews had six hundred and thirteen laws—all of which led to a life of uprightness. This is the virtue invoked by God's prophet which should flow down as mighty waters. This is the paragon of virtue, highly exalted by those of every communion. And yet today we come to look at the statement of a man who believed that there was something in life greater than righteousness . . . a virtue exceeding that of being upright.

In the fifth chapter of Romans, Paul says, "for scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet, peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die." Righteousness or goodness—which is the chiefest among them? While Jesus did not say it exactly that way, most of what He did

say added up to the same conclusion: that man can be meticulously righteous without being good. He can be rigidly inflexible, prim and puritanical, strait-laced and unbending and in the process he can be right by all the laws of regular religion.

Yet, something is lacking. He, like the pharisee, can keep all 613 of his Jewish laws in punctilious tediousness and in the process be the object of envy of the lesser breeds without the law. Consequently, he can set himself to the grim task of making other people right, carrying the torch in unrelenting mission zeal, encompassing land and sea to make one proselyte, crusading in fervent passion for his cause—still with all this, the main thing can be lacking. He can fail to be good.

### FORCED DEVOTION

Look at the ugly, cold facts of history. Constantine, in his fanatical devotion to his new faith of "Christianity," was so bent on making converts that he gave as an alternative to baptism, death by the sword. Be a Christian or I will kill you! That was his program. Some Christianity indeed! Or recall the bloody massacre of St. Bartholomew, or the many inquisitions through the centuries—those blood baths sponsored by the church to perpetuate the pagan lie that the ends justify the means.

Someone quickly rises to say, however, what is wrong in putting a strait jacket on passion, by sitting in astute judgment on every impulse so that a Spartan disciple can check-rein the drives of man? Just

### BAPTIST HOUR SERMON TOPICS FOR JANUARY

January 5—Clean Hands and Clean Pages

January 12—Profit or Loss?

January 19—Three Cheers!

January 29—Unique Wisdom: Soul Winning

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this: while righteousness may command all kinds of respect, it never inspires affection. And Christianity is one hundred per cent of a religion of affectionate love and nothing else! Let me repeat it: though righteousness may command profound respect, it never arouses the deep and unmotivated love which is the genius of Christ's kind of life. If this is not the case, then there was no need whatsoever for the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God.

Religion in its legalistic, righteous expression flowered forth in Judaism unlike any other. Yet, we know that was not enough—any more than it is enough for a man and woman to be married whose relationship is based on being right, exact, punctilious, and law-abiding. Yes, they must have this relationship, but it is not enough. There must be love or the other virtues pale into relative insignificance. Where love is, then law and righteousness shine like a newly minted gold coin.

#### SELF-RIGHTEOUS

Moreover, goodness takes precedence over righteousness because righteousness without loving goodness is a kind of repellent thing: it is the last company a joyous person seeks. One tolerates the presence of a self-righteous person in church—but not by choice of natural association. These five-talent, always-right people have a way of leaving the rest of us cold on the spot. Had New England Puritanism one extra dimension and that of relaxed down-to-earth goodness, then perhaps our day would not be so cursed by impuritanism. But at no place along the line would it yield its starchy orthodoxy in favor of a warm, heart-winning loving goodness. Instead, it folded its prim hands across its righteous lap and looked in condescension on the rest of the pagan rabble. In the process it lost its soul.

Jesus got down and became a friend of the very sinners on whom a Puritan would have looked with disdain. No, I am not suggesting the infamous policy of accommodation or compromise. But we are to be in the world while not being of the world. The alternative to righteousness is not unrighteousness; we are not to become a generation of lawless libertines. Jesus did not come to destroy the law but to make

it full—full of goodness in addition to its granite exactitude.

Into the synagogue went a very righteous man to pray. As he stood amidst the regal splendor of the great edifice, he thanked the Lord that he was not as other men—other unrighteous men. Nearby stood a common man of the street who had never mastered those rigorous laws of self-effacement and his prayer was simply a plea for God's mercy on a sinful mortal. Jesus said the first man's prayer was really nothing more than ego's oration; the second man truly prayed. Just a direct case of goodness taking the lead over righteousness.

Moreover, this Galilean Saviour said something even more irksome to Pharisaical righteousness. He said that harlots and outcasts have a better chance of entering the kingdom than those religious bigots who have dotted every religious "i." Why? Because a penitent prostitute at least knows the enormity of her sin and feels the compulsion of a Saviour; whereas, one who is enamored by his own sense of being right seldom, if ever, feels or expresses a need for being otherwise.

Such was the sin of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. This elder brother had stayed home, was working in the back field looking after his parents. There was nothing wrong in that; in fact, much that was right. And this while the younger strip was having his fling out in the world. But the point of the parable while citing the patient love of God for every wandering prodigal is also pointing that a spirit of self-righteousness is as vile in God's eyes as one who would frequent the haunts of the hogs.

#### THE QUALITY OF TRUE GOODNESS

Now let us look at what He meant by the quality of true goodness . . . what is the anatomy of this rare virtue that takes precedence of righteousness. Did he mean that general state of things when one pays his debts, gives lift to a fallen brother, maintains respectability, etc? No, he meant quite other and more than these things. Goodness to Jesus meant an out-going life of self-abandonment where all is laid on

the altar of sacrificial service. It means purity of motive, a heart without alloy, ever seeking to keep in first place the things of His kingdom.

Much as that Phi Beta Kappa graduate who gave his life to foreign mission service. After returning on his furlough from New Zealand, one of his former class mates asked him, "Why on earth do you go way over there as a medical missionary to heal those primitive people when there are millions of sick people here at home?" Would you note that he didn't answer by saying that he went because he was called, or that he couldn't be happy doing anything else, or that the world will go to the dogs if more missionaries don't go. He said simply, "I went to heal them because they were sick." Isn't that reason enough? Isn't that the straightforward honesty that should characterize all that we do in His name? Work for the sheer joy of working and for the purpose that it needs to be done. If our motives were given a clean scrubbing, then both method and result would be greatly enhanced. Or, if you please, like a preacher friend of mine who accepted a call to a church less than half the size of the one in which he was serving with a fifty percent cut in salary for the sole reason of wanting to help those who needed him most.

Such rare goodness sets no limits to sacrifice, knowing that the one who is being served had sacrificed his all. If much of the theological rigmarole, the elaborate speculative theories, the grandiose rationalizing that has a way of clouding the picture—if these could give way to a warm

heart in decisive action . . . the Kingdom of God would be in better stead.

Let me state with certainty that righteousness will never win the world to God but goodness will. Reluctance not supported by affection will not compel man's sloven allegiance. The world has tried the road of legalism and found that it ended at Sheol. It has tried a looseknit system of mild ethics all interspersed by superstition and witchcraft. These have left him in his old condition. Now: let us lay hold of that unique fashion of uprightness and honest-to-God goodness as a weapon for this warfare of life. This will command respect and response; this is the way of our Christ.

Seeing smoke and flames curling out of an upstairs window in an old southern plantation home, a huge Negro man rushed into the house, fought his way through blinding smoke up the spiraling stairway into the bedroom of its only inhabitant, sixty-eight year old white woman. As he brought her out, he was singed, smoked and paining as he crouched his heavy chest down over the frail, sickly body of the woman to protect her. There on a mat made of Spanish moss he placed her safely away from the burning home. Both survived, but till this day the man wears the scars from the flames. Someone asked him one day, "Isaac, why did you do that? Why did you run such a risk?" He answered in muted tones, "Cause da Missus is such a good lady!" "For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet, peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die," and Jesus dared and died for you and me.

## NOT FOR SALE

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Romans 12:1-2; 14-21

There are some things in life that should never be sold, some properties never listed for the market. Man is endowed with birthrights that are not barter for the world. But demagogues and tyrants go on the belief that every man has a price on his head . . . that every man can be bought regardless of his principles or convictions. Unfortunately, this is too nearly the truth. So, I come to tell you anew

that there are some things on which you should never put a price tag, no matter how brisk the buying or sharp the bidding. The proof of the matter is easily seen when one tries to buy them back.

### CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

You should not sell your Christian virtue; it is a rare possession. Purity, chastity, honesty, and the like are but a few of the facets to this diamond that en-