

*“There is none righteous, no not one . . . For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:10,23 “Brethren, if any man do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth a sinner from the error of his ways shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.” James 5:19,20*

## **RIGHTEOUSNESS**

by Craig Marlatt

Not long ago one of our city’s leading newspaper columnists wrote an article in the paper here about a large number of businesses that were being drawn to our downtown area. He thought that we should encourage this growth for the monetary benefit of the city, but that there were some obstacles that potentially stood in the way of progress. The main one was, he commented, the large number of social service agencies that are headquartered in the downtown area. This, he felt, had a tendency to draw “down and outers” to the area which, he said, gave a bad image to our otherwise wonderful town; and that this image would cause new businesses to look elsewhere for potential locations.

Logically speaking, he seemed to have a good point of view. But there was one statement that he made which stood out to me more than the rest of the article: He said that such social service agencies (Rescue Missions, feeding programs, Salvation Army, etc.) would be better off moving out to the strip because “. . . that’s where all the sinners are”.

Normally this would not bother me except for the fact that I have heard that this particular writer claims to be a Christian. It amazed me that someone who seems to be so intelligent could indeed be so ignorant of the truth. Out of this statement I think it is safe to conclude that this man has never had a revelation of his own sin condition, and without that there can be no true Christian experience: “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” If we eliminate this doctrinal teaching from the scriptures then there is no real need for Christ to have died for sinners. If it is possible for man to live a life without sin, then who needs Jesus?

No, our writer was incorrect in his statement that all the sinners were out on the ‘strip.’ God says all the sinners are everywhere. The most successful man at the top of our largest corporation is no less a sinner than the worst drunkard in the Bowery slums of New York City. Of both the most famous saint and the vilest person on earth God makes his universal assessment of man: “All have sinned”.

In the secular world there seems to be very little problem facing this fact. Most people will admit that they are not perfect (and that is basically what sin is: missing the mark, ie. imperfection). Rather it is among professing Christians that this doctrine often finds its harshest critics. Far too many churchgoers are there because they think that they are not sinners and they go to church because they don’t want to be associated with the sinners of the world. Yet in fact this is the opposite of the way it should be. The Church of Jesus Christ is in fact a house of sinners. Redeemed and forgiven sinners, but sinners everyone.

In fact, if I may be so bold, you cannot be a Christian unless you are a sinner. Even John the Baptist recognized this saying, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance”

(Luke 3:7,8). In other words, don't come here to identify with God unless you came to get right with Him. "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). If you are already righteous, then you don't need Christ's righteousness. His is reserved for sinners.

Although few people would claim to be righteous if they were asked straight out, yet many would say they are not really sinners. This reasoning is based upon a lack of true knowledge of what sin is according to the Bible. Like our columnist friend, many would point to the prostitutes, drunkards, gamblers, and criminals when describing what a sinner is. Because we usually associate sin with sinful acts, we wrongly conclude that those who kill and steal and rape are sinners, and those who don't aren't. But how does this argument stand in the light of Romans 3:23? If "all have sinned" and yet all may not have done sinful acts, then sin must somehow differ from sins. And this is so! Sin is the state of mankind. It is the nature of every unregenerate person who now lives or ever has lived since Adam. It is an inherent quality born within each human life. It is not (except in the case of Adam) the fruit of sinful deeds, but rather the cause of such.

A child that is born and dies immediately has not committed sin, but is nevertheless a sinner, just as a pear tree that gets uprooted before its fruit bearing season begins is still a pear tree while it lives. We are not sinners because we sin: we sin because we are sinners!

Undoubtedly, if we look to ourselves for help there is no remedy to be found for our condition. Neither can we look to other men for sin's solution because all have sinned. No, the remedy does not, nor can it ever possibly lie with men. Because our sin is primarily and specifically against God, man cannot provide sufficient remedy. Only God can do this . . . but does He want to? Yes! God wants to forgive us and blot out our transgressions. He not only wants to, but He has that ability: He can forgive, and forget our sins (I John 1:9; Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Because of his righteousness and justice He cannot just forget them, but He must make an atonement for them or payment for them. But how can this be done? How can man do anything good enough to remove his sin from God's sight? He cannot! Only God himself can do this, and He does so in his Son Jesus Christ.

Since the penalty for sin is death, then someone must die for sin. But because sin is first and foremost against God, the death of a sinful man cannot make sufficient payment for sin. That is why God himself had to come in the person of His Son Jesus Christ: to die for the sin of the whole world. Because the whole world has sinned there must be an atonement (payment) made that is sufficient for the whole world. That payment is made in the death of God himself, Jesus Christ: God the Son. In Jesus' death God the Father has said, "It is enough. I am satisfied. I will blot out your transgressions because Jesus has made sufficient payment for them".

Do you know this truth? I pray so. Yet I am convinced that there are many who, like our writer friend, do not recognize their own sinfulness. But it is only through truly seeing this that we can see the glory of the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is in this truth that our only real hope lies: "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6).

Who could stand in the presence of God naked and unashamed without the cleansing power of Jesus' blood? No one! But in His holy presence we shall stand, every man. For "every knee shall bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord"

(Philippians 2:10,11). And in that throng will be many whom the world rejected and despised, who will walk through gates of splendour into eternal life because they trusted in him who “. . . came into the world to save sinners”.

And then there will be those who come trusting in their own goodness, completely satisfied that within themselves they would be found righteous when their life was weighed in the balance. And unto these the Lord will say, “Depart from me, for I never knew you”.

No, it is not our way of life that makes us pleasing or displeasing to God. We are either in His Son or we are in sin. There is no neutral ground. We must come to him who alone is righteous, and be clothed upon with his righteousness. Then and only then can we be free from the power of sin. Then and only then can we have peace with God. A peace based upon having a pure conscience with God, worked out in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.