

“THE FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

August 27, 2017, 10:30AM

Scripture Texts: Proverbs 11:30; Isaiah 32:16-17; Romans 14:17; Philippians 1:9-11

Two Stories.

Two Apple Trees (credit to Melissa Kruger).

Imagine walking down a path and seeing two trees in the distance both of which are obviously laden with apples. But as you get closer you notice a big difference. On one tree the apples are tied on.

Not just that, but someone has gone to a lot of trouble meticulously tying hundreds and hundreds of apples to the tree. But despite all their efforts, this second tree is clearly not an apple tree.

What gives it away? How can you tell the second tree is not an apple tree? The strings, of course. The fruit of the one tree is the obvious fruit of the sap flowing through the trunk and branches. The fruit of the second tree is the external efforts of someone trying to pass the tree off as an apple tree, but with strings attached.

Piano Lessons (credit to Frederick Buechner).

How many of you took piano lessons growing up?

How many of you parents forced your kids to take piano lessons?

Phama and I were slow learners. We forced all five of our boys to take piano lessons with much weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, and after three or four years each we surrendered and went on to the next son to torture.

Imagine the exasperation of a young piano student who has memorized his piece, he has hit every note with complete accuracy, but his teacher says “you don’t have it right yet.”

What’s wrong? His fingers have it right, but his heart isn’t in it. Our boy’s hearts were never in it, so even though they could play the notes, it wasn’t working. You can play all the notes perfect and have it come off boring and lifeless and fruitless.

Jesus said this was the problem with the scribes and Pharisees.

Matthew 5:20 Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The scribes and Pharisees played all the notes exactly by the book, they did all the do's and don'ts, but their hearts weren't in it. They thought they were doing it all right but they were doing it all wrong.

When Jesus says let your righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees He means greater in kind not in degree. Not that we keep more rules than them but that we keep them from the heart and out of love.

Am I righteous? Yes and No.

Are we righteous? Well, it depends on what you mean by righteous. Consider the example of Paul. He was a Pharisee, and when he was a Pharisee he described himself as righteous, blameless under the law. He played all the notes and got them right. He had all the external fruit, meticulously tied on. He did all the do's and don'ts. But as he came to understand, he was not righteous.

The first three chapters of Romans are very clear about this.

Romans 3:10 “None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.

Romans 3:20-22 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Paul speaks of his personal encounter with this righteousness.

Philippians 3:8-9 I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. ... 9 and be found in him, *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.*

When we put our faith and trust in Christ, God takes Christ's righteousness and gives it to us, He imputes it to us and sees us as righteous because of what Christ has already done.

So in Christ, yes we are righteous, or made right before God. But are we righteous? Well, it depends on what you mean? There is a second meaning to righteous that is defined as

holiness, purity, inward character and conduct. In this sense, no we are not yet completely righteous.

The first is the work of Jesus on the cross; the second is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The first is perfect and complete, the second is not yet perfect and complete.

The second kind of righteousness is the evidence or fruit of the first kind of righteousness. The one necessarily flows from the other. We are known by our fruit. Out of our mouth, our hearts speak.

It is in the area of on-going righteousness where we need much help.

Some of us aren't really all that interested in pursuing more righteousness, holiness, godliness, Christ-likeness. Instead we are seeking personal satisfaction, contentment, comfort, ease. We think God exists for our benefit, rather than us for His glory.

Our heart isn't in it and when that is the case we don't play very well, or not in a manner that inspires others to want to play well.

How can I become more righteous?

Proverbs 23:26 My son, *give me your heart.*

Paul's prayer in Philippians 1 is very revealing. We are granted a glimpse into his prayer life. Paul is praying for the sanctification of the saints in Philippi. If Paul were writing to the church in Lynden, this is what he would pray for us, for our sanctification, for the fruit of our lives.

He begins by praying that their love would abound more and more and that as a result of that they would be filled with the fruit of righteousness. Righteousness flows out of a heart that is abounding more and more in love for God.

In I Corinthians 13 Paul says that if we have not love we are a clanging symbol, we are nothing. Love is at the heart of righteousness.

Love is the first of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the first evidence of His work in our hearts as He creates in us a love for God and for others. Love is the heartbeat of righteousness.

Christianity is a religion of the heart. Righteousness is a matter of the heart.

Is our heart right in the sight of God? Man looks on the externals, God looks on the heart. God saw David's heart and said he is a man after my own heart.

Righteousness is loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbor even as you love yourself (Matthew 22:37-39).

Anything that calls itself righteousness or holiness or godliness and doesn't have love is hollow, a fraud, a form of playing badly.

We would do well to imitate Paul, to learn how he prayed and what he prayed for and ask the same things for our self and our family and our church. Come this evening and pray.

Parents, as a new school year begins make this prayer your prayer for your children this year. Pray it for them weekly if not daily. Pray it for their teachers and friends.

The practical fruit of righteousness.

This second righteousness is practical, it has skin and hands and feet. It's fruit that is seen. Practical righteousness is the work of the Holy Spirit, built on the foundation of Christ's perfect righteousness. It's the fruit of the Spirit, it's good works, it's acts of mercy and kindness. It is anything you do out of love for God and love for others, from a humble heart.

Remember the tree with the apples tied on it, what kind of heart is that? It's a proud heart, a self-righteous heart. The other tree knows the fruit is from God, so there is no boasting.

Nowhere in Scripture is it implied that the righteous are sinless, or that they stop sinning. It is not that we don't sin or have indwelling sin, but we don't make peace with it.

A right heart feels the tension of our old nature and our new nature. A cold, hard heart feels nothing of the tension in us over sin and evil, it doesn't notice or care.

A right heart feels the battle, knows the constant struggle with sin, puts up a constant fight for faith and against the enemy.

The most righteous person still has serious sins and flaws and defects in character. This life is a constant battle with the flesh, the world and the devil.

David and Peter sinned, they gave into temptations that lurk about all of us, they did evil that was in their hearts, but they grieved and turned to the Lord and did not depart from God. They had right hearts that knew when they had done wrong and they did what was right.

Don't expect too much from a right heart. That's right. Don't expect perfection, don't expect sinlessness. Don't expect never to fall, never to be weak in faith or to have fears, doubts or anxiety. Our hearts are human, still sinful and living in a wicked and sinful world.

Our salvation is still being worked out and brought to completion. We have not arrived, but we keep striving. We are all a piece of work and a work in progress. And all of us are in various stages of the journey.

Have you noticed the seven apartment buildings going up on Kok Road? Every time we drive by, we see each of them in various stages of construction, first the dirt work and foundations, then the framing and roof, then the interior and exterior work and finishing work. One of them is finished and occupied, the others coming along, some slowly, some quickly.

That's us, no two of us are at exactly the same place in our spiritual journey. Some of us feel like novices or rookies; some like sophomores, some like seniors; some in elementary school, some high school, some college. Some at the beginning of the race, some nearing the end of the race.

The question isn't where we are, but are we running, are we fighting the fight of faith, are we pressing on, striving, yearning, desiring, hungering and thirsting, not growing weary.

None of us walks a straight path toward heaven, but a twisting and turning one, sometimes stumbling and falling a few steps back. But we get up and press on.

The practical fruit of righteousness is faith with Nikes on. It's a long obedience in the same direction, a "slow and steady wins the race" kind of faith and fruit.

How is your fruit? How is your playing? How is your heart, your love for God and others? Are we growing, are we making progress, do we desire change and holiness even if we lack it? Do we want more of Jesus' character in us and flowing out of us?

Are we finding victory by God's grace over old sins and habits? Would our spouse say they see practical, fruitful change over the years?

More fruit from practical righteousness, peace and joy.

Righteousness sounds serious, hard, long faced. Seriousness is not one of the fruit of the Spirit. The serious business of heaven is joy.

Romans 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

When we are living out practical righteousness, peace and joy follow. When we are pursuing unrighteousness, we have no lasting peace and joy. Selfishness and pride don't produce good fruit.

The Pharisees didn't exhibit peace and joy, people caught up in legalism or self-righteousness never have that. Just playing the notes won't make you happy.

If I hold out to you death and life, sorrow and joy, which would you chose? Life and joy, of course who wouldn't when it is put so plainly.

Unrighteousness is the path to death and sorrow.
Righteousness is the path to life and joy.

To the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, ... so that you may ... [be] filled with the *fruit of righteousness* that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

This is the aim, the goal, fruit that brings glory and praise to God.

Matthew 5:16 Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

John 15:8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Jesus teaches us that when we bear much fruit, that glorifies God, the Father.

Psalms 23:3 He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Matthew 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Prayer: Holy Father, God of righteousness, holiness, and purity, we claim to love you and follow you, yet we drift along in complacency, we neglect the weighty things, and ignore the most important things. We seek to excel in things that are temporal, trivial, temporary and not in the things that are eternal, true and lasting. Holy Spirit, wake us up, stir our hearts, create a real dissatisfaction with our spiritual condition, give us a holy discontent with anything less than a real desire to know you and love you and follow your ways. Give us ears that hear the call to righteousness not as a call to legalism or drudgery but as a call to life and a call to glory and a call to what most truly satisfies our deepest longing as men and women.

Enable us to say our hope is built on nothing less, nothing more, nothing other, than Jesus blood and righteousness. When we are robed in His righteousness alone, only then will we be able to stand faultless before your throne.