

## Sabbath School Lesson #13 – Lessons from Jeremiah – 19-25 December 2015

Christ would have us learn lessons from Jeremiah, and the main lesson is not all the evils that people in Jeremiah's day committed, but that Christ is our righteousness. Thus Jeremiah says, "Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth" (Jeremiah 23:5). He also says, "In His days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this *is* His name whereby He shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (verse 6). We focus on the lesson of Christ's Righteousness.

Focusing on one lesson from Jeremiah, the Lord our righteousness, we study how the Bible reveals existence of two classes of righteousness. In His sermon on the mount, Christ said to His disciples and the multitude, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). The Pharisees were the best people in the Jewish nation, and it may be said, in the world. That is, so far as outward acts were concerned. The name Pharisee signifies 'separated;' and they took this name because they were separated from the common people by their superior goodness. They were full of zeal for the law, yet Jesus said to His hearers, and to us, "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Some have erroneously concluded from these words that Jesus was finding fault with them for keeping the law so strictly, and that He would have us ignore it. On the contrary, He says that our righteousness must exceed theirs. That is, it must go as far as theirs, and farther still. Then we must keep as much of the law as they did, and more. How can that be? Matthew 23:27-28 explains: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men's* bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." The Lord wants righteousness that comes from the heart. He did not object to having the Jews outwardly righteous; He would not have us openly break the law; but He wants both outward and inward service.

These two degrees of righteousness are really two kinds of righteousness. These two kinds of righteousness are named by Paul in Philippians 3:8-9: "Yea doubtless, and I count all things *but* loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them *but* dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." Paul here clearly recognises his own righteousness as righteousness entirely distinct from the righteousness that is of God by faith. The former was such righteousness as the scribes and Pharisees find; the latter is the kind which we must have, – a kind far exceeding that of the Pharisees, – if we would enter into the kingdom of Heaven, – the latter is the Lord our Righteousness.

On one occasion Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matthew 21:31). How could it be that the publicans and harlots, the scum of the earth, could get to Heaven more readily than those strict Pharisees who kept the law? One would naturally think, 'Surely the publicans and harlots have a great deal more to do to get ready for Heaven, than the Pharisees have.'

Christ's statement is repeated by Paul in Romans 9:30-31: "What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness." In answer to the question, "Wherefore?" Paul continues to say: "Because *they sought it* not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone" (Romans 9:32); and Paul later explains, "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:3).

Now we have the whole thing of the two types of righteousness before us. The Jews, even the scribes and the Pharisees, followed the law, and so far as anybody could see, they kept it strictly. Then they trusted to their own works, and did not submit to the righteousness

of God. But the Gentiles, and the publicans and harlots, had no good works to trust in, and therefore they willingly accepted the righteousness, which is of God by faith. Thus the publicans and harlots receive the blessing of God more readily than the Pharisees.

But why is it that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees could not count for something? And why could they not be counted as nearer the kingdom of God than those who were openly vicious? For the reason given in Romans 14:23 is “for whatsoever *is* not of faith is sin.” How can this be? Just this way: simple outward righteousness is as much righteousness as any man can attain by himself; but this is so far below the righteousness that God requires that it is indeed sin. It is not real righteousness at all. Thus Isaiah says: “But we are all as an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isaiah 64:6). And anyone who has any just conception of God must acknowledge the truth of this verse in Isaiah. Whose righteousness can bear any comparison to the righteousness of Christ? Compared with the spotlessness of His character, the righteousness of the best of men (that is, their own natural or acquired righteousness) must be acknowledged to be but filthy rags.

Then what will be the condition of the man who looks at his own good works with complacency, and who thinks to atone for his shortcomings by his own good deeds? He is simply trying to cover one filthy, ragged garment by putting on some more filthy rags. Instead of making himself better, he is in a worse plight. Paul says: “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, *it is* evident: for, The just shall live by faith” (Galatians 3:10-11). That is, a curse is pronounced upon all who do not keep the whole law. But “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and moreover, no man is able of himself to keep the law, no matter how hard he may try (Galatians 5:17). Therefore, all who trust in their own works are necessarily under the curse of the law.

How foolish then for one sinner to compare himself with another; for one to think that he has not so great a work to do to be saved, as some other one has, because he has not lived so wicked a life as that other one has! Both have been wicked, although perhaps not to the same degree; and therefore both need the cleansing blood of Christ. They cannot be saved without Christ “for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). There is nothing but Christ’s blood that can wash away sin. As such, sinners, great and small, must all do the same thing – must go to Christ for cleansing. There is just as much for one to do as for another. And since the love of God in Christ is infinite, it is just as easy for him to cleanse the vilest sinner as the most scrupulous Pharisee.

When the sinner has been justified by faith, what then? Then “the just shall live by faith;” “this is the victory that overcometh the world, *even* our faith” (1 John 5:4). “For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Romans 10:4). The one, who has the most faith, will live the most upright life. Human righteousness is of no more worth after a man is justified than it was before. Says Christ, “Without me ye can do nothing.”

“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). How highly ought a man to think of himself? Just as much as upright Job did after he saw the righteousness of the Lord; said Job, “I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). Then how much have we to do to prepare to meet Christ in peace? We have to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, and to exercise much faith, – the real faith that works by love (Galatians 5:6). Then will Christ be “made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). “And this *is* His name whereby He shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jeremiah 23:6). Therefore Jude says He “is able to keep you from falling, and to present *you* faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy” (verse 24). Revelation corroborates this promise by displaying a people who stand “without fault before the throne of God” (Revelation 14:5), for God’s law is in their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33), Amen! Nothing else but the contrite concern for the honour of Christ can “keep you from falling.” Selfish concern, such as fear of hell, working for reward in heaven, will fail.