

God's Man Meets God's Standards For A God-Pleasing Life.

Text: Psa 28:8-9, 1

Suggested Hymns:

503, 330, 364, 283, 347

1) With God's Help His Righteousness Exceeds
the Outward Respectability of the Pharisees

2) With God's Help The New Man Exercises The
Strength Given To Him In Baptism For Holy Living

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Psalm 28:8-9, 1, ⁸ ***The LORD is their strength, And He is the saving refuge of His anointed.*** ⁹ ***Save Your people, And bless Your inheritance; Shepherd them also, And bear them up forever.***

¹ ***To You I will cry, O LORD my Rock: Do not be silent to me, Lest, if You are silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit.*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

What kind of life does God want me to live? This is a question that the child of God frequently asks himself. Frequently we are thrown into new situations. We meet new people. We are confronted with new crises, crises of a nature different from those which we have weathered before. Decisions have to be made, often on the basis of insufficient evidence. The ship of our life takes us into unmarked lanes and sometimes into uncharted seas.

Often we are tempted to act without the full approval of conscience. Often conscience raises the question after the act: *"Did we do what is right? Was our conduct Christian? What impression did our action make on those with whom we share the faith?"*

Often the best of God's saints are most sensitive to the evils and imperfections and transgressions in their lives. They know more fully than others what is in their hearts. They know what God requires. Frequently they become very discouraged, discouraged because of the lack of spiritual progress, discouraged because of the setback that a particular sin represents in their lives. Where, oh, where will I find the strength and guidance to live as God wants me to live?

This is a perennial problem for God's children. This was David's experience. This was the experience of Paul, Augustine, and Luther. God provided an answer for each one. Yes, even more. He directed them to a source of strength. This victory has been achieved again and again in the story of God's people.

Our message for today is designed to illustrate how *God's Man Meets God's Standards for a God-pleasing Life*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. With God's Help The Christian's Righteousness Exceeds the Outward Respectability of the Pharisees

The Outward Respectability of the Wicked

The psalmist David speaks of the outward respectability of the wicked when he describes them as those ³ ***Who speak peace to their neighbors, But evil is in their hearts.***¹ We see this tendency illustrated in international relations. Representatives of powerful nations in international conferences frequently brand their chief competitors as war-mongering, while they represent themselves as peace-loving.

They engage in subversive activities, trying to undermine the security and the governments of other people, and then raise their hands in self-righteous indignation when their opponents resort to the same tactics, even when it is done in a less offensive manner.

They give economic aid to the underdeveloped nations, not because of a real desire to help, but merely to propagandise their own political views and to win the never-ending war with their competitors. They declare that they desire to introduce a classless society, and yet they have the privileged classes in their own midst.

This inclination to speak peace with their neighbours while evil is in their hearts is frequently exhibited in the political arena and becomes most acute when election time draws near. Social snobs demonstrate the same hypocrisy. Economic rivalry frequently is based on deceit and cunning, pretending peace but planning destruction.

The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

In His Sermon on the Mount the Lord Jesus similarly warns against a superficial righteousness, when in a criticism of much of current Judaism He tells His hearers in the Gospel lesson for today, ²⁰ *For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*²

What was this righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? The scribes were the educated class among the Jews. They were students of the Law of God as revealed in the writings of the Old Testament, especially in the books of Moses.

But their knowledge was mostly of the head and not of the heart. They knew the theology of the old covenant, the nature of God, and His plan of salvation. They were well acquainted with the prophecies that foretold the person and work of the Messiah.

But much of their learning was merely academic. They could tell Herod that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea, and yet these facts meant nothing to their hearts and lives. They failed to join the Wise Men from the East who went on to Bethlehem to worship the Messiah-King.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day similarly had their righteousness. They were very strict in their outward observance of the Law, regular in their worship, faithful in prayer, even over-scrupulous in their support of the temple and its worship. Yet all of their worship was purely formal.

Instead of humbling themselves before the Lord they paraded themselves before men. Instead of confessing their sins they congratulated themselves on their own perfection. Instead of recognising their common guilt with all humanity they emphasised their spiritual superiority over other people. As a result they were self-righteous, loveless, harsh in their judgement of others, sterile in a life of kindness and genuine good works.

Modern Formalism

When we examine contemporary church life and contemporary worship, we get the impression that much of it is external, superficial, formal, like the formalism and externalism of which David and Jesus complained.

We feel that often our own worship and church life is routine, mechanical, without the powerful participation of an awakened heart. Some worshipers may

even participate in the liturgy without a full comprehension of its meaning, mechanically going through the motions of confessing their sins, without true contrition in their hearts, without genuine sorrow over their many sins.

They appear to join in the sinners' cry for mercy without a realisation of their own misery, without a recognition of the wrath of God which is ready to punish their transgressions. They seem to hear the sweet promises of the Gospel of forgiveness without due appreciation of its blessings, with no inner conviction that the Lord is precious and that His Word is a treasure.

They repeat the words of the Lord's Prayer, but do they comprehend its spiritual blessings — the forgiveness of sins, rescue from temptation, and deliverance from evil.

The Insufficiency of Man

Where shall we find the power to avoid a purely outward, a mere Pharisaic respectability? One thing is certain: that we cannot find this power within ourselves. In spiritual matters we cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We cannot solve our problems by our own inner resources. By nature we are insufficient to cure our own spiritual ills.

The psalmist speaks of his own frailty, his absolute dependence upon the Almighty. He declares, *if You are silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit*. One thing is certain: modern man with all his progress, however admirable and diverse it may be, cannot solve his fundamental needs without divine help and divine guidance.

Must we not confess that frequently our own worship is formal, our piety superficial, and our religious life external? We all have the scribe and Pharisee within us, who is satisfied with having rendered a mechanical obedience to God's directives. Worse yet, especially when the old Adam gets the upper hand, when sin dominates, we, too, are inclined to speak peace with our neighbours while evil is in our hearts.

How often is this not the case in family life, in church life, and in the world of business! Often we are terrified by the enormity of our own transgressions. We feel compelled to pray with the psalmist, ³ *Do not take me away with the wicked And with the workers of iniquity.*³

We fear God's wrath and dread His punishment. We become weary with our old ways, tired of a life which often conflicts with God's holy will. We reach the point where, like the prodigal son, we come to ourselves. We see the futility of sin, the vanity of life separated from God, the uselessness and emptiness of pursuing earthly mirages and temporal fads. We are looking for peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, reunion, and a new beginning.

The All-Sufficiency of God

There is a source of power and wisdom through which we can make our own lives meaningful and significant, our worship and fellowship with God vital, inward, and dynamic. David found this source of strength in God.

He exclaims in our text, ⁸ ***The LORD is their strength.*** In other words, *The Lord is the Strength of His people.* This strength results in ultimate salvation. Our religious life need not remain external, formal, mechanical, because God can work an inner transformation in us. He can make us new creatures, give us a new heart. This is something He can do. This is something that He desires to do.

The Christian's fellowship with God and relationship to Him is a many-sided experience. It is a fellowship established by divine initiative. God comes to us. God seeks His own. The psalmist speaks of God's children as His "*people*" and His "*heritage*." The psalmist speaks of himself as God's "*anointed*."

God has also anointed us as His own. This involves His choice of us. Jesus tells His disciples in John 15:16, ¹⁶ ***You did not choose Me, but I chose you,*** We are God's royalty, His priesthood. Through God's choice we have become kings and priests, family

of the King. As His heritage God regards us as His most priceless possession.

Fellowship with God — a Two-Way Avenue

God has taken the initiative to make us His own, by sending His Son as our Saviour and making us His adopted children through faith in Christ Jesus, a most intimate fellowship, which God wants us to enjoy and cultivate.

The Lord is our Salvation. This is a fact. Yet we must also continually commune with God. The Lord is our Strength and Shield, our Refuge and our Shepherd. Yet these are blessings for which we must continually pray.

God is our Strength, and yet we must always seek His power. He is our Guide, and yet we must always pray for His direction. In this way do we obtain the power and wisdom to avoid the mere outward respectability of the Pharisees.

Similarly when the Lord Jesus declares that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, He is indicating that God's standards are higher than those of men, that God's standards involve the heart, and that God's standards comprehend all of life.

Above all, Jesus is inviting us all today, as well as His contemporaries, to find in Him help to avoid a mere external and formal respectability. As He Himself tells us in John 15:5, *for without Me you can do nothing*.

2. With God's Help The New Man Exercises The Strength Given To Him In Baptism For Holy Living

Baptism — A means of Blessing

Yes, even more. Our Epistle for this Sunday⁴ suggests that the power and strength of Christ are made available to us through the means of grace, the preaching of the Gospel and the holy sacraments.

Baptism is one means through which these blessings are conveyed to us; it is a washing of regeneration, through which the Holy Spirit is given.

Sadly, the sacrament of Baptism has frequently been slighted in modern church life. There may be, it is true, some sort of celebration and some festivities at the occasion of a child's baptism, but often its significance is quickly forgotten as soon as the sounds of the first festivities die away.

We remember and commemorate our birthday. But the day of our baptism, the day of the second birth, the birth from above, quickly fades out of mind.

We send each other greeting cards on the occasion of our birthday anniversary. Yet no one thinks of congratulating a fellow Christian on the anniversary of his rebirth by water and the Spirit.

This new spiritual life must be faithfully nourished and strengthened through diligent use of the saving Gospel of God's grace and mercy, of God's pardon and forgiveness, with frequent reassurance in the Lord's Supper.

Baptism and Christ's Death

Through Baptism the child of God comes into fellowship with Christ. This is what it means to be baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Through Baptism we are united with Christ in His death. We know what significance the death of Christ has for us. We read in Romans 4:25 that *Christ was put to death for our trespasses*.

Every one of us should have been put to death for our own sins. Each one deserves to be banished from God forever to the lowest parts of hell because of his transgressions. Each one of us is worthy to be excluded eternally from God's grace because his rebellions are an offence to the majesty of God.

But in Christ we already have been put to death. In Baptism we in fellowship with Christ have experienced death. Therefore we need never experience it again.

Baptism and Christ's Resurrection

Through Baptism we are united with Christ also in His life. Children of God hope for the resurrection. They desire to share eternity with God. They long for reunion with loved ones who have preceded them in death. Above all, they desire life with Christ, strength from Him, guidance for every day, now, in every passing moment.

Through Baptism these fondest hopes are fully realised. We heard in the Epistle Lesson, *⁴ Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*⁵

Christ's resurrection made possible our spiritual renewal. Christ's resurrection banished the enemies that would keep us in death and in spiritual slavery — sin, guilt, the devil, and hell. As long as we were in their power, we had no hope for anything. We could have no aspirations for fellowship with God and, if we did, they could never be fulfilled.

But in Christ's resurrection and in Baptism, through which we are united with Him, we have made a new beginning. We are daily supplied with sources of power.

This is how the Christian meets God's standards for a God-pleasing life. Fellowship with God and true worship are never something merely external. The religious life and communion with God are never a mere earthly experience.

Religion can never be reduced to mere culture so that it represents only man's quest for God, man's thoughts about God. No, true religion is God's quest for man, God's revelation of His thoughts to man, man walking in fellowship with God.

The Christian like David of old prays, as written in Psalm 28:9, ***⁹ Save Your people, And bless Your inheritance; Shepherd them also, And bear them up forever.*** The Christian, as all of God's people in the past, has God as a Shepherd to guide and guard him, to feed and sustain him. Therefore he has the power to meet God's standards for a God-pleasing life. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Psalm 28:3

² Matthew 5:20

³ Psalm 28:3

⁴ Romans 6:3-11

⁵ Romans 6:4