

Are the Works of the Saints Truly Righteous?

By Edward Irving

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THERE has of late been introduced a most baneful method of bringing out perfect holiness before God, by saying that the creature can do, or can be made to do, no good or acceptable thing whatsoever; but, regenerate and endow him as you may, he yields an imperfect and polluted action at all times, which God could not by any means accept on its own account as righteous, but which he accepts as righteous on account of the righteousness of Christ.

Enumerating the Errors

This, which is in everybody's mouth, has so many errors in it, that I hardly know where to begin the enumeration of them.

1. It makes God call that which is unholy holy. Now what is unholy is sinful, and cannot by any addition be made holy. It may be forgiven of God, but it cannot be approved. That it is forgiven to the believer because of Christ I fully admit, but that it is called righteous for Christ's sake, I utterly deny.
2. It makes Christ have a power of righteousness which he puts into action through the believer, but which fails to produce one righteous action. To remedy this failure, he has a store of inactive righteousness, a treasury, a reservoir of merit, which he keeps in reserve to make weight, and so bring up the defectiveness of the believer's works to the standard of God's absolute perfection.

Which is to present us with a Head who holds back His strength from the members out of mere reserve, and who puts forth what he does put forth only to be baffled, and so

patches up the matter out of the remainder of merits which he took care to keep beside himself. Such conclusions!

3. It denies the nature of the regenerate man to be holy in himself, and contradicts all Scripture. And it denies that the regenerate man does good works, and that he fulfills the righteousness of the law, and that he is anything else than a sinner,—not so great, indeed, as the carnal man, but still thoroughly and in all particulars a sinner! Oh! what a wickedness is contained in that common form of humble, or rather Pharisaical words:

“We do nothing good,—our best actions are evil, and accepted of God only for the righteousness of Christ.”

They are either accepted or not accepted. If accepted, they are the work of Christ in us, the fruit and offspring of the regenerate man. If not accepted, they are the works of the flesh, altogether sinful in God’s sight, and the proper subject of godly sorrow, and repentance, and remission.

Scripture Examples

But that good works are done, and ought ever to be done, by the regenerate, is manifest, both from the requirements and declarations of all Scripture; as, for example:

Genesis 6

⁹ Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.

Genesis 17

¹ The Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be perfect.

Exodus 19

⁶ And you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

2 Kings 20

³ I beseech You, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before You in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in your sight.

Job 1

¹ There was a man...whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.

⁸ And the Lord said unto Satan, Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that fears God, and eschews evil?

Psalm 15

¹ Lord, who shall abide in your tabernacle? who shall dwell in your holy hill?

² He that walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart.

Psalm 37

³ Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shall you dwell in the land, and verily you shall be fed.

²⁷ Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell for evermore.

³⁷ Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace.

Psalm 101

² I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way. O when will you come unto me? I will walk within my house with a perfect heart.

³ I will set no wicked thing before my eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me.

⁴ A perverse heart shall depart from me: I will not know a wicked person.

⁵ Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will cut off: him that has a high look and a proud heart, I will not suffer.

⁶ My eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me: he that walks in a perfect way, he shall serve me.

Ezekiel 14

¹⁴ Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, says the Lord God.

Matthew 5

⁴⁸ Be therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Matthew 16

²⁷ For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

John 14

²³ ...If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.

John 15

³ Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

Romans 12

¹ I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

² And be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

1 Corinthians 7

¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.

2 Corinthians 4

¹⁰ Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.

2 Corinthians 5

¹⁵ And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.

¹⁷ Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

2 Corinthians 6

¹⁶ And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? for you are the temple of the living God; as God has said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Galatians 2

²⁰ I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Ephesians 1

⁴ According as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

Ephesians 2

¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 6

⁸ Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man does, the same shall he receive of the Lord...

Philippians 2

¹² Wherefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

¹³ For it is God which works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

¹⁴ Do all things without murmurings and disputings:

¹⁵ That you may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom you shine as lights in the world;

Colossians 1

¹⁰ That you might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God;

²² ...to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight:

²⁸ Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:

Colossians 4

¹² ...always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

1 Thessalonians 3

¹³ To the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

1 Thessalonians 5

²³ And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians 2

¹³ God has from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth:

¹⁴ Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself...

¹⁷ Comfort your hearts, and establish you in every good word and work.

1 Timothy 2

2 ...that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour;

1 Timothy 5

¹⁰ Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work.

²⁵ Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid.

1 Timothy 6

¹⁸ That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate.

2 Timothy 2

¹⁹ Let every one that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

²¹ If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

2 Timothy 3

¹⁷ That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

2 Timothy 4

¹⁸ And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Titus 2

⁷ In all things showing yourself a pattern of good works: in doctrine showing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity,

⁸ Sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.

¹² Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;

¹⁴ Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.

Hebrews 11

⁵ By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.

Hebrews 12

¹⁴ Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:

Hebrews 13

²¹ Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 1

¹⁵ But as he which has called you is holy, so be you holy in all manner of conversation;

¹⁶ Because it is written, Be you holy; for I am holy.

1 Peter 2

⁹ But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that you should show forth the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light:

1 Peter 3

¹⁰ For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:

¹¹ Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it.

1 Peter 5

¹⁰ But the God of all grace, who has called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that you have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you.

2 Peter 2

⁷ And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked:

⁸ (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;)

1 John 2

⁵ But whoso keeps his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

⁶ He that says he abides in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.

²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you know that every one that does righteousness is born of him.

1 John 3

⁶ Whosoever abides in him sins not: whosoever sins has not seen him, neither known him.

⁷ Little children, let no man deceive you: he that does righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous.

⁸ He that commits sin is of the devil; for the devil sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.

⁹ Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin; for his seed remains in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

²² And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.

3 John

¹¹ He that does good is of God: but he that does evil has not seen God.

Jude

²⁴ Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,

Revelation 2

² I know your works, and your labor, and your patience, and how you can not bear them which are evil...

⁹ I know your works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but you are rich)...

¹³ I know your works, and where you dwell, even where Satan's seat is: and you hold fast my name, and have not denied my faith...

¹⁹ I know your works, and charity, and service, and faith, and your patience, and your works; and the last to be more than the first.

²³ ...and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

²⁶ And he that overcomes, and keeps my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations.

Revelation 3

⁸ I know your works: behold, I have set before you an open door, and no man can shut it: for you have a little strength, and have kept my word, and have not denied my name.

¹⁵ I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot: I would you were cold or hot.

Revelation 14

¹³ ...Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them.

Revelation 20

¹² ...the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

The Head and the Members

....We maintain, therefore, that in virtue of these Seven Spirits, of that complete Godhead power which is in the Head of the body for distribution throughout all the members, every member, whatever be his office, ought to present a perfect work before God.

And thus it is that God, and Christ, and the Seven Spirits, are co-essential and co-operative in every believer towards the production of any true and perfect work of godliness. Wherefore it is written,

1 Corinthians 12

⁴ Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.

⁵ And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord.

⁶ And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which works all in all.

These working together according to their several offices in the members of Christ's body, it is little short of blasphemy to assert that the fruit will *not* be a good work, perfect before God.

To hold that the actions of the regenerate man introduced into the body of Christ, and, having in him the power of the Head, are not, and cannot be holy, is to say that God is baffled by His creatures;—that God, having purposed and undertaken a work of regeneration in man, has utterly failed.

But the truth of Scripture is, *not* "He that is born of God must ever sin;" but

1 John 3

⁹ He that is born of God cannot sin.

What is born of the Spirit is spirit; and the spirit ever lusts against the flesh, and its fruits are in all goodness and righteousness and truth.

Christ's Righteousness Manifest in Our Flesh

If indeed, as these poor erring brethren roundly assert, it would constitute Christ a sinner to take and to bear flesh with the law of flesh in it, then it must be that every action of the regenerate man must be sinful, having to prevail over the law of flesh in his members.

But if, as the truth of all Scripture and theology is, that Christ took flesh with the law of flesh in it, and against that law prevailed to work out a perfect righteousness, and presented his body acceptable unto God, then did he originate a new power in law,

Romans 8

² ...the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

The very essence and character of this law is to make man free from the law of sin and death, and to enable him to fulfill the righteousness of the law, by walking not after the flesh but after the Spirit.

Now because a baptized man is baptized into this single truth,—that Christ has condemned sin in the flesh, and introduced into it the life and law of righteousness,—he is a debtor to crucify the flesh, not in part, but altogether; and to serve the law of righteousness, not in part, but altogether.

And therefore God can require of us nothing short of perfection, or be satisfied with nothing short of it. And so at our baptism we are required to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh, like good soldiers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Doctrine of Antichrist

To require less, as has been said, would be either to say:

1. It is impossible with God to bring holiness out of flesh, and therefore that Christ did never take flesh as we have it, but in some better state; or
2. As Christ is, we are *not* in the world; as He overcame, we are *not* to overcome; that there is *not* oneness between the Head and the members; that He has a power which we have *not*, and in the days of His flesh put forth a power which He does *not* give us to put forth in the days of our flesh.

And either of these positions is Antichrist.

I have no hesitation in saying, that to deny that Christ came in flesh with law of flesh is Antichrist, and that the Church which will maintain it is apostate, and ought with all haste to be forsaken by the faithful, whom indeed she will not bear, but will persecute forth of her doomed city.