

Knowing God #8

by: Ronald L. Dart

Would you agree that Jesus was a good man? I doubt that we could find anyone who would argue to the contrary. Would you agree that Jesus was a righteous man? I am reasonably sure you would. But what exactly does that mean, a righteous man?

What Does God Want Us To Know About Him?

I ask this question before, if you only had a short time to tell someone about God, what would you want to be sure and tell them? Each of us might have his own list, but God gave us His. You'll find it in Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 24, He said this, "Let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, which exercises lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight." Three things, in particular, that He wanted us to know about Him, all of which speak to His character: loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness. And the last thing on God's list of things He wants us to know and understand about Him is, that He exercises righteousness in the earth.

What Is Righteousness?

Since Jesus is God in the flesh, we would surely expect Him to be an example of righteousness. But again, I have to ask, what does that mean? The Psalmist answered it this way, he said in Psalms 119 and verse 171, "My lips shall utter praise, when you have taught me your statutes, {172} My tongue shall speak of your word, for all your commandments are righteousness." And I suppose that makes sense. There has to be something somewhere that defines the difference between right and wrong. Yes, we have a conscience that tells us what's right and what's wrong, but what is it that informs our conscience? Where does it get its inputs? How do we finally learn that something is right and something else is wrong, so that we get guilt feelings when we do something wrong.

The word 'righteousness' means, simply 'rightness'. It's important to know because men have a hard time of getting the question of right and wrong straight. The question that bothers us most is, "Why is this act right and why is the other one wrong?"

The Two Great Commandments

Some people came to Jesus on one occasion (Matthew 22:34) and one of them was a lawyer, and he asked Jesus a question, deliberately tempting him. He said, {36} "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" Now it is not clear what the lawyer was driving at. Was

he looking for one of the Ten Commandments or whatever it was, Jesus answered and said to him, {37} "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. {38} This is the first and great commandment. {39} And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself {40} On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now this is a truly fascinating answer. It has far-reaching implications, and that last sentence is the one that does all the damage. "On these two commandments," He said, "hang all the law and the prophets." Now Jesus' choice of words is interesting because it implies that the rest of the law depends on these two great laws. They are like nails, nailed to the wall, upon which everything else is hung. Pull out those nails and all the law and all the prophets fall to the ground.

And what are they again, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now consider this, when the law says, "Thou shalt not steal," this law hangs on a greater law. What would that be? Well, it is "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." When you love your neighbor you don't steal things that belong to him. You respect his property.

Every law in the Bible, every last one of them, is an explication of one or the other of these two great laws. Each and every law is an answer to the question, how do I love God? Or how do I love my neighbor?

Now consider this. Love is a constant in life. If we want to argue that a given law has been abolished, what we're arguing is, that we no longer need to love God in this way or that we no longer need to love our neighbor in this way, and if that's the case, then was it not really love in the first place?

Jesus Did Not Abolish The Law

In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus said something very important about this. In chapter 5 and verse 17 of Matthew, Jesus said this, "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets, I did not come to abolish but to fulfill them." I don't know if you noticed but the same terminology He used in answering the question about the great commandment, remember what He said, "These are the great Commandments, upon these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Here Jesus says, "Don't think that I've come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I didn't come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

Jesus said plainly that He is leaving the law intact and indeed He must because the law was merely a detailed description of how to love God and how to love your fellow man. Jesus continued to say, {18} "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass, not the smallest letter or stroke of the pen shall pass away from the law until all is accomplished." Now I

could pause for a moment and let you look outside and see if heaven and earth are still there, and if they are, the written law is still there too.

Yes, I know how problematic this statement is, but Jesus is very explicit here. He doesn't leave any wiggle room on the issue, especially all the way to say, not one jot not one title, not a stroke of the pen, not a period at the end of a sentence is going to pass out of this, until everything has come to pass.

Jesus goes on to say, { 19 } "Whoever then annuls, one of these least of these commandments and so teaches others, he will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Now is anyone willing to tell me that Jesus annulled some or all of these commandments when He said, "That anyone who does annul them or even teaches that, will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus continued in verse 20, "For I say unto you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." What? You're righteousness, your rightness, the fact that you live your life according to the law, according to the two great laws, "You love the Lord your God with all your heart, and you love your neighbor as yourself." You can't claim to love your neighbor as yourself when you lie to him, cheat and steal from him, can you?

So this is where we are. This is what Jesus said we have to live up to. Now we can discuss the problems of Jesus' statement, and there are some, at another time, but for right now, let's just see Jesus, as an example of what God meant, when He said, "That He exercises righteousness in the earth."

Why Did Jesus Say He Was Not Abolishing The Law?

Do you have any idea why Jesus said what he did, about not abolishing the law? There was a reason, you know. He was launching into a sermon in which He was going to teach from the law, and the problem was, His teaching was going to directly contradict a lot of things the Jews believed about the law, so He wanted to be sure, from the get-go, that they did not misunderstand what He was about to say. While He would teach contrary to the Jewish oral traditions, He would not be teaching contrary to the written law. That's why He made this statement.

Now what follows immediately in Matthew's Gospel will serve to illustrate this quite well.

It is sometimes hard for people involved in traditional Christian teaching to get their mind around the fact that Jesus was a teacher of the law. The reason is simple. The law was in the Bible which defined righteousness. It said this behavior is right and that behavior is wrong. This way to worship God is right and that way is wrong and so when Jesus came along, He

was given to righteousness and since He would live a righteous life in every aspect of it and would teach righteousness, He naturally was a teacher of the law.

But the problem that Jesus ran into with the Jews that He was talking to was, that they had a tradition about the law, in addition to the law. They had an Oral Law that had added enormous amounts of material of do's and don'ts and things they had to do in order to be a good Jew, that didn't necessarily follow through from the written law itself.

And so Jesus said, "Don't think I've come to do away with the written law, but I do have some things I'm going to have to tell you about your traditions." In Matthew 5 verse 21, Jesus says this, "You have heard it was said by them of old times, you shall not kill, and whoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment." Now I feel safe at this point, don't you, because I have made it all the way to this point in my life, I'm over 68 years old, now, and I have not killed anyone. I feel pretty good about that.

However, there are some things that the written law can't quite reach. Jesus said, {21} "You have heard it was said by them of old time, you shall not kill, whoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. {22} But I say unto you, that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment. Whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' ('You Fool which is an insult'), shall be in danger of the council, whoever shall say, You fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." What Jesus is telling us here is, that your temper, your anger, your tendency to explode in the face of another brother, is going to take you into the realm of murder.

Therefore, here's how you ought to live your life, here is some rules of righteous conduct, {23} "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, {24} Leave there your gift before the altar and go your way, first be reconciled to your brother, and then, come and offer your gift." Jesus has chosen here an extreme example. Theoretically, we should really think about this before we ever go down bringing a gift to the altar, but His point is, if you're all the way there, if you're at the altar, with your gift, ready to offer it and you remember, suddenly, that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there, go your way, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

I don't know if you realize what Jesus is doing here. There is a law, "Thou shall not kill," which hangs on that part of the law and the prophets that you shall love your neighbor as yourself, and as a part of that law, Jesus is talking about the spirit of the law, that along with that, in order to really be righteous, you have to be a person who is given to reconciliation, a person who is willing to be reconciled. You don't even leave the grudges hanging out there, much less kill somebody for them.

Clean Up Your Act

Continuing in Matthew 5 verse 25, "Agree with your adversary quickly," Jesus said, "while you're in the road with him, lest that at any time he deliver you to the judge, the judge delivers you to the officer and you be cast into prison. {26} I am going to tell you the truth, you will not come out of there until you pay the last penny." What is Jesus talking about? What He is talking about is, cleaning up your act. Cleaning up your heart, being a person who is a reconciling person, who puts differences aside. who resolves problems, resolves difficulties, negotiates his way out of problems, instead of trying to go to violence to get your way out of your problems.

Let's look at another illustration of how Jesus explained this. He says in verse 27 of Matthew five, "You have heard that it was said by them of old time, you shall not commit adultery." Okay, we all should understand that. "But I say unto you, that whoever looks upon a woman to lust after her, has committed adultery with her already in his heart." Well, that becomes little more difficult, doesn't it? Now you have to consider what's going on inside and you have to head off the thoughts, the ideas, the approaches that are going to cause you to commit adultery. If you can recognize the rising of lust, if you can recognize the problem of even looking at a woman to desire, of a women you shouldn't desire, if you can see the problem there, you are going to head off adultery in the process.

Then Jesus says something really difficult, {29} "If your right eye offends you and causes you to sin," He says, "pluck it out, throw it away, it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish and not that your whole body should be cast into hell. {30} If your right hand offends you and causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you, for it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish and not that your whole body should be cast into hell."

Well, how are you to take that? Obviously, it's a figure of speech, because if you go into a store and you shoplift, your right hand reaches out and takes a sweater and tucks it under your jacket and you go out with it, it is not your right hand that is solely guilty for this thing that has taken place. Your right hand does what your head tells it to do, right?

So what is Jesus talking about? What He is doing is using a figure of speech to illustrate, that no matter how close something is to you, no matter how dear it is to you, if it is the kind of thing that's going to lead you in the direction of breaking the seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," cut it off, get rid of it! Get rid of that subscription to Penthouse magazine or Playboy magazine or Hustler, or whatever it is that you have laying around the house. Just get rid of it and cut it off and that's not all. Whatever it is that heads you down that way, you need to deal with it.

Righteousness Is A High Standard

Righteousness, you see, is a very high standard and it involves the heart as well as the hands. But, this is important to know, it is a standard that Jesus lived and expects us to live. The mere fact that we can't get it perfect all the time, it in no way excuses us from the effort to follow His example.

Sure we make mistakes. Sure we have to be forgiven. Sure we have to repent and go to God asking Him to forgive us, but the fact is, tomorrow, having been forgiven, we don't need to be going out doing the same thing all over again.

Jesus Christ is an example of the righteousness of God and that means that God has standards that He expects us to live up to. We do not get brownie points for keeping God's standards and His laws. All we're doing is reaching the minimum standard He expects of us and He expects us to go beyond that! He expects us to follow the example of Jesus Christ.

Baptism

This story is described in Matthew three and verse 13, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. {14} John didn't want to baptize him saying, 'I have need to be baptized of you, and you're coming to me?'" {15} Jesus said to him, 'I want you to do it, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness', so John baptized Jesus."

Now it's interesting that Jesus said, "It was necessary to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness." So I would ask, is baptism required of us? Of course it is. Now we approach baptism thinking that baptism is to wash away our sins. Baptism is so that you can be forgiven, but Jesus never committed any sin. He is the perfect example of the righteous life. Why did He need to be baptized? Well, if for no other reason, to set an example for us!

Beatitudes

One of the most familiar passages in all of Jesus' teaching is a section called the Beatitudes. It's interesting, right in the Beatitudes, comes this same question of the righteousness of God. We have probably heard somewhere that Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." But right after that, He said in Matthew five verse six, "Blessed are they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." You know, I really think that most of us really want to do the right thing down inside of ourselves. We engage in a lot of self-deception from time to time, about what is right and what is wrong, and we have an awful time sometimes doing what we even know to be right.

Jesus says, verse 6, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness," who really make some effort, who really do want to please God. Continuing, He says, "For they shall be filled. {7} Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. {8} Blessed are the pure in

heart, for they shall see God. {9} Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Why are People Going to be Persecuted for Righteousness Sake?

Let's continue in Matthew 5 and verse 10, "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Righteousness' sake. Now here is a real mystery when you sit down and think your way through what righteousness really is, loving your neighbor as yourself, loving God with all your heart and soul and mind. Why would somebody be persecuted for that?

Then you get down to the various laws that fall under these headings, like "Thou shalt not steal, Thou shall not covet, Thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," all these are marvelous commandments. Now, these are the kind of people we would want to live next door to.

Why are people going to be persecuted for righteousness sake? That's a tough one. The only answer I can give to you is that, evil is present in the world at all times, and that evil hates the right, hates the good, and fights against it.

I suppose one of the problems is, that those people who really, do try to live right in this world, in their actions, even apart from their words, they don't have to say a thing, by the continual doing of the right thing, they condemn the people who won't. And so they are reviled for what they do.

Jesus said, {11} "Blessed are you when men shall revile you." They will say all kinds of bad things about you. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when you say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. {12} Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets which came before you."

You know, it seems, the Bible tells us (2 Timothy 3:12) "That all who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution," and there really is no way to understand that, except to understand, that in the process of living a godly life, you make people feel guilty, who don't!

You Cannot Serve God and Mammon

Later in the same sermon, Jesus spends quite a bit of time helping you to establish your values and to understand what is really important in life. In Matthew six and verse 24, He says, "No man can serve two masters. He will either hate the one and love the other, or be loyal to one and despise the other. And you cannot serve God and Mammon." Mammon is not a word we use very much and doesn't click with us a lot, but basically what He is saying is, you can't serve God and your stuff. You can't serve God and this world and things like cars and jobs and money. They just don't work.

Let's continue in verse 25, "Therefore I say this to you, don't take any thought for your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you put on. Isn't the life more than food and the body more than clothes?" Now Jesus doesn't mean that you don't plan your wardrobe. What He means is, don't take any anxious thought. Don't sit around worrying about these things!

"Look," He said, {26} "See the birds flying around up there, they don't sow, they don't reap, they don't gather anything into the barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them. Aren't you better than they? {27} Which of you by taking thought can add one inch or one cubit to his stature?" Can you actually stand up against the wall and by worrying about it, make yourself taller or shorter?

Verse 28, "Why are you worried about clothes? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they don't work and they don't spin. {29} But even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like these. {30} Now look at this fellow, if God clothed the grass of the field this way, which today is, and tomorrow it is cast into the oven, is he not going to much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" So, don't worry, saying, what shall we eat or what shall we drink or how we are going to be dressed. {32} The Gentiles look after all that stuff. Your heavenly father knows what you need of."

Seek First the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness

Okay, so what are we supposed to do? If we are not to be seeking after the physical things, what do we seek after? Oh, Jesus has an answer for that! Verse 33 of Matthew 6, "Seek you first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." I think sometimes people stop when it says, "seek you first the kingdom of God," and forget that second phrase "seek his righteousness." Now what this says to me is that we're supposed to try to live a good life. How hard is this to understand? We are to follow a righteous life. What are we to use to define what righteous is? Well we use the law. We read the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments tell us how to love God and how to love our neighbor, in some details and then there are all kinds of other laws in the Bible which describe for us circumstances in which we may find ourselves and how we can respond to them and be in line with the law.

Hypocrites

I suppose it's possible to fake righteousness, because some people have certainly made a very good effort at it. Jesus spoke to them on one occasion. You will find it in Matthew 23 verse 27, he said, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" That is a strong word in our language. It was probably about as strong then but what it really meant then was a play actor, somebody who went on the stage and acted out a part.

Jesus said, "Woe to you, for you are like white washed tombs, you appear beautiful on the outside but on inside full of dead men's bones and every kind of uncleanness." What did

Jesus mean by that little analogy? This is what He means. {28} "Even so, you also outwardly appear righteous to men but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."

You see, this is what Jesus was driving at in the sermon on the Mount, when He talked about this is what the written law says, but I tell you you're going to have to go further than that, we're going to have to get down inside of you and rearrange the wires. We're going to have to change the way you approach life. We're going to have to change the way you think about other people.

Jesus said, {29} "'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build the tombs of the prophets, you garnish the sepulchers of the righteous and {30} You say, 'If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have done what they did.' {31} Jesus said, 'Well you are witnesses to yourself, that you're the children of the people who killed the prophets. {32} Fill up the measure of your fathers. {33} You serpents, you generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?'" These are very, very tough words.

You know, Jesus goes on here to say eventually what He is going to do to these people is to send them a test. You can only pretend to be righteous so often. You can build the tombs of the prophets. You can whitewash the outside. You can appear to be righteous to all your friends. But what God is going to do is send something your way that you will be tested on to find out what's really inside your heart.

And you know the time to think about that is now. If your heart is not right when the test comes, you'll fail.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart, and you were Born to Win!

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Ronald L. Dart is an evangelist and is heard daily and weekly
on his Born to Win radio program.

You can contact Ronald L. Dart at Christian Educational Ministries
P.O. Box 560 Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: (903) 839-9300 — 1-888-BIBLE-44

www.borntowin.net