



Just Try Harder?

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I've been working on a new sermon series at the seminary where I teach. It is a series on righteousness. Almost all of my teaching comes from questions I ask. I study the Bible to find answers for me, and then I share what I've discovered with others. I started thinking about this series after reading Matthew 5:20 where Jesus said, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

When I read that verse, I had a scary thought: *The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were far more righteous than I am. They really were "good" people. If one defines "righteousness" in terms of obeying rules, being very religious, doing all the right things and being quite proper, I'm not even close to them.*

If, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, I have to be more righteous than the Pharisees and teachers of the law, what am I going to do? I've already tried to live by the rules, to do the right thing and to be more religious. It was really hard work. That hard work led me to ask a lot of people how to do it better. Almost all the advice I received was the equivalent of "just try harder." They didn't put it that way, of course, but that's what they meant. They talked about "the crucified life," about "the power of servanthood," about "learning to enjoy God," about "sanctification being a work of the Holy Spirit," about "moving on to perfection" and about the "joys of holiness." Problem was, it was almost always based on me, my work, my obedience and my purity.

I tried...I really tried. Sometimes I even achieved a modicum of success. I wasn't as good as the scribes and Pharisees, but, if I kept at it, I might make

it. After all, I was a pastor, wrote books and tried to be a servant. I was big on holding people (including myself) accountable, on church discipline, on the cost of discipleship and on reminding people about the dangers of "cheap grace."

That's when reality hit! God let me see myself (he still does) without all of the denial, the lies and the games. Do you know what I saw? I saw an arrogant Pharisee who, in his effort to do it right, had become a pain to myself and everyone else. Not only that, I was able to see my sin, my failure, my disobedience and my religiosity in all of its starkness. It scared me to death.

I started repenting in sack cloth and ashes. How could I have been so blind? That's when I heard God laugh. It's so irritating when one is being very serious and religious, and God laughs not an angry, derisive, condescending laugh—but a joyous, free, accepting laugh.

"It's about time!" he said.

"I'm so sorry. I'm going to do a lot better. You just watch. I'm going to read the Bible a lot more, and pray more, and be good, and you will be so pleased with my obedience."

"What makes you think you're going to do it now when you couldn't do it before?"

"Well...now that I know the error of my ways, I'll try harder and stuff."

"What if I told you that I define righteousness differently than the way the Pharisees and teachers of the law define it? What if I told you that you are already more righteous than they were because you have the righteousness of my Son? What if I told you to stop trying harder and just let me love you? What if I told you that I don't appreciate your trying harder? What if I told you that you already have an 'A' for life?"

"That would be fine. But you can't do that. You're God!"

he asked me...

"Now you are going to tell me how to be who I AM? Just let me define myself. After all, my thoughts aren't your thoughts, and nothing you do can change it. I am immutable. What would you do if you knew that for a fact?"

"First, I would be glad. Then I would get some rest. Then I would tell everyone I know what you're really like. Then I might laugh a little more, be less critical and quit trying to be everyone's mother. I would be kinder and gentler toward myself, too. But then...that wouldn't be very spiritual."

"Of course it wouldn't be spiritual! I'm really quite tired of spiritual people. That was the problem with the scribes and Pharisees. They were spiritual and knew it. The really righteous rarely know it. Others don't either. Doesn't matter. 'Righteousness' is another word for 'freedom'—that comes from being accepted and joyfully living with that knowledge. It's dancing without always looking at your feet."

"Wow, that's a relief!"

"I meant it that way."

I'm not exactly sure what I'm going to say in that sermon series on righteousness. I'm still working on it. But whatever I say, I've decided that I'm not going to tell people to *just try harder*. I'm going to tell them about a God who loves them, and then I'm going to see what happens when they (and I) understand that fact. I suspect that righteousness comes from the "constraint" which finds its root in God's love (2 Corinthians 5:14). And because it is, after all, his love, that means if there is no righteousness, his love is the same. Now... that would be a radical message!

C.S. Lewis once penned a humorous epitaph. It reads:

*Erected by her sorrowing brothers;
In memory of Martha Clay;
Here lies one who lived for others;
Now she has peace. And so have they.*

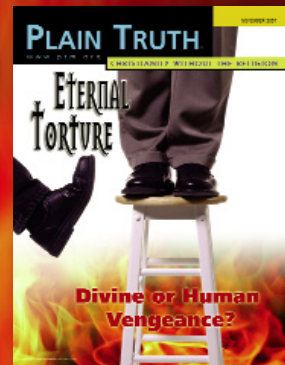
May God save us from the *righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees. And may God save me from my own righteousness when it isn't from him. You too!

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown

MARCH/APRIL 2008

What our readers say about Hell



In the November 2007 Plain Truth, we invited readers to share their opinions about Greg Albrecht's article, "Eternal Torture—Divine or Human Vengeance?" You might say we received a "hell" of a response! Because we took a moderate (and, we believe, Biblical) position, we received numerous subscription cancellations from those with strong views on both ends of the spectrum (those who believe in everlasting torture as well as those who believe in shortlived punishment—or none at all). In general, it seems that most of our respondents do not believe in never-ending torment, yet most respondents do believe in some form of hell. Of course Plain Truth does not endorse all of these opinions—but we are happy to see that our article has made people think!

In response to your article, yes, hell is real and for anyone not to believe that hell is real, they have seriously misinterpreted the Word of God. Anyone who rejects Jesus Christ, the wrath of God shall be upon him (John 3:36).—Clifford, North Carolina

I am in total agreement with your article. Although I don't attend any church at present I love the Plain Truth articles, as I have come to a place where I must practice Christianity without religion. If Jesus died for our sins then doesn't he have a plan to ultimately deal with them in a loving way? I scratch my head when Christians talk of eternal torture and in the next breath talk about God's grace. I do see judgement, correction and complete destruction of evil. Thanks for a well written and hopeful article.—Gloria, Texas

I agree that retributive justice in the old testament sense of "eye-for-eye" is not what is taught in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus forgave heavy-duty sinners during his ministry on earth. He stated that those forgiven much would love him much, and those forgiven little would love him little. —Fred, Florida

I wholeheartedly disagree with Mr. Albrecht's assessment of hell. I believe Scripture clearly teaches that hell is separation from the love, mercy and grace of God, but also the place where God himself pours out his holy wrath on unredeemed sinners, the unsaved, those who have not been born again by God's marvelous grace. God is there—his omnipresence demands it (many Christians believe God has almost nothing to do with hell, since he is "separated" from it). He is there as the God of wrath & justice. To say one's sins don't merit eternal punishment is taking a rather light view of one's sins, don't you think? The Word explicitly says that eternal condemnation will be everlasting. Please cancel my subscription.—Mark, Missouri

The just recompense for sin is the denial of eternal life; hell involves perishing. The torture doctrine has been prevalent for over 1,600 years. Remarkable!—Kenneth, Kentucky

I believe your premise of specifications, temperature and longevity in the hereafter missed a central truth. The Bible repeatedly says that following our death, we will become spirits that are free from all earthly senses. Therefore, we will not be subjected to pain and suffering. Also, we will have no sense of time which makes longevity a non-factor in eternity. We will all be judged as spirits and the only "condition," if you will, will be a separation from God's love and joy for those whom Christ judges as unworthy.—Skip, Vermont