

Righteousness*

By

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"There is really only one thing worth being concerned about." Luke 10:42

"Do you pray with your patients?" Phillip asked. "That depends upon the patient." I replied, "Do you pray with your doctors?" "Not any more", Phillip said brusquely. Even though I had only known Phillip for a few minutes, he was telling me a lot about himself already.

Phillip had been in therapy before with a Christian psychologist. Since he had been told that I was also a Christian, he was trying to find out if his treatment with me would be something like what he had experienced before.

"I'm sure he was a really good therapist, and all, but I just didn't do well with Dr. Richmond" Phillip said. "He knew exactly what was wrong with me, and what I should do to change. But, I guess I just didn't want to change bad enough. I didn't want to waste his time, or my money, so I quit."

Phillip is a Christian man who does well in most areas of his life, but he has a private struggle with which he would like help. Although he has never acted on them, he has occasional suicidal thoughts, which are quite disturbing to him.

"I know the Bible says it's a sin to kill someone, even yourself," he cried "but I get so depressed sometimes that the idea of ending my own life just pops into my head. I really don't want to have these feelings, but simply telling myself that they are wrong doesn't make them go away."

Phillip was tormented by feelings that he didn't understand. He didn't want to die, but he couldn't help thinking about death sometimes in ways that make him very uncomfortable. He was desperately trying to control his feelings of depression and thoughts of suicide, which only made him feel more depressed. Ending his own life became the one thing he could think of to ultimately control his emotional struggle. Ironically, he thought killing himself might be the only way to rid himself of his sinful suicidal thoughts. He believed that the Bible, and his previous therapist, were telling him he should simply renounce these feelings and choose to feel differently about himself. Phillip believed that righteousness was choosing the right thing to do, and he felt ashamed of himself because he simply wasn't able to do it in this one area of his life.

I was able to help Phillip, in part, because I didn't define righteousness in the same way that he did. Telling ourselves the right thing to do, and then living up to that by the strength of our own will power is not my idea of righteousness. As a psychologist, I see Jesus'

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idea of righteousness as making our relationships with God and others as right as we can.

Because of where Phillip was in his relationship to his faith, and because of his past experiences in therapy, I took the emphasis off of what he should be doing in our work together and put it on who he was as a man. Instead of focusing upon how he was failing to live up to standards of righteousness, or psychological health, we focused upon his feelings, and what had happened in his life that might be contributing to them. We discovered some interesting things.

First, we discovered that he was not sinful, or sick, for having the feelings that he did. In fact, we found that his feelings came out of previous experiences that could explain why he felt the way he did. As Phillip understood where his feelings of depression came from, he was less tormented by them and stopped trying to control them so much. He began to see his feelings of depression as part of his life that would naturally come and go, which made him feel less out of control and less in need of some desperate action to stop these “sinful” feelings. As time went on, we discovered that Phillip wasn’t really as interested in forcing himself to do and think the right things as we was in feeling that he was a man with integrity, one that struggles to honestly deal with himself. And eventually, we discovered that as Phillip felt less out of control of himself, he had fewer suicidal thoughts as well.

It turned out in Phillip’s life that his suicidal feelings were not the problem. They were only the symptom. Focusing upon the symptom of his behavior that was disturbing didn’t seem to help him. Focusing upon his feelings about himself, his therapist and his God, did. Trying to force himself to live up to some technical standard of righteousness wasn’t helping Phillip. Trying to work out a relationship that felt right with me, and God, did.

Jesus understood what we have discovered in psychological theory: the connection is central to the cure. Being technically right according to our psychological theory at the expense of the relationship with the patient is like the brain surgeon who took delight in the success of the operation even though his patient died. Not that our theories are not important, in fact, it is because they are so important that we need to constantly consider the impact they are making on our patients, and be prepared to sacrifice our theories before we sacrifice our patients.

From Jesus’ perspective, righteousness is maintaining right relationships and sin is anything we do which separates us from God and others. This has always been confusing for religious people who define righteousness as having to do with right behavior rather than right relationships.

Jesus always made people a priority. He didn't believe that legalistic accuracy could improve the condition of the human heart. He defined righteousness as an attitude of the heart rather than faultless behavior. This is why Martha was mistaken in thinking her “doing” for

Jesus was somehow better than Mary's interest in simply "being" with him. When it comes to righteousness, "There is really only one thing worth being concerned about".

Spiritual Principle: Righteousness is right relationships.