

THE RIGHTEOUS ONE vs THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS

I. [Romans 3:21-26](#) [Luke 7:36-50](#) [Mark 10:17-22](#) [Luke 18:9-14](#)

A. For over 2,000 years, Jesus has been apprehending all sorts of people--from every nation, tribe and tongue. Many of these are among the last people you'd expect Him to choose. Think of the disciples, Mary Magdalene, Levi & Zacchaeus, the thief on the cross, hardened centurions, right on down to us...

B. Today we'll explore the most difficult people there is to reach. While no one's beyond our Lord's sovereign grace, perhaps the most challenging are the self-righteous. These are folks who don't think they need a Savior because they're good enough on their own. They view their own record of good works as sufficient in establishing their right-standing before God and therefore *The Righteous One* isn't necessary. The same is true of believers regarding sanctification. Ask the Galatians. Remember: The grace that saved us is the grace that sanctifies us. If Isaiah compared our righteousness to filthy rags, how's your wardrobe looking? What kind of spiritual fashion statement are you making?

C. So first let's establish how *The Righteous One* brings forth a righteousness that comes exclusively by Him, by His undeserved mercy and love (called Grace) through Faith (which He grants as a gift) and not by works or any human attempt to earn your own right-standing before our Most Holy God. [Ephesians 2:8-9](#) (ESV) puts it this way: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*"

D. [Romans 3:21-26](#) (AMP) is our leadoff text, our launchpad. There's no better news in the universe than what I'm about to read. We'll read it from the Amplified: **21** But now the righteousness of God has been clearly revealed [independently and completely] apart from the Law, though it is [actually] confirmed by the Law and the [words and writings of the] Prophets. **22** This righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all those [Jew or Gentile] who believe [and trust in Him and acknowledge Him as God's Son]. There is no distinction, **23** since all have sinned and continually fall short of the glory of God, (All means ALL) **24** and are being justified [declared free of the guilt of sin, made acceptable to God, and granted eternal life] as a gift by His [precious, undeserved] grace, through the redemption [the payment for our sin] which is [provided] in Christ Jesus, **25** whom God displayed publicly [before the eyes of the world] as a [life-giving] sacrifice of atonement and reconciliation (propitiation) by His blood [to be received] through faith. (**2 Cor. 5:21**) This was to demonstrate His righteousness [which demands punishment for sin], because in His forbearance [His deliberate restraint] He passed over the sins previously committed [before Jesus' crucifixion]. **26** It was to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the One who justifies those who have faith in Jesus [and rely confidently on Him as Savior].

E. So let's allow these words to transport us to the home of a man named Simon who is a Pharisee. Simon's thrown a dinner party and Jesus is one of his guests. Are there other religious leaders present? Most likely. Perhaps it's a scholarly crowd with good food and plans for deep theological discussions to follow. Everything was probably going swimmingly until *Pretty Woman* showed up...

F. [Luke 7:36-50](#) (NIV) documents the event. Matthew, Mark, and John tell us about a different anointing of Jesus that takes place in Bethany by Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. Luke's story unfolds at a different place and time...

1) **V36: 36** When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, He went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. (They literally reclined on couches before a low table, their feet sticking backwards like the spokes of a wheel.)

2) **V37: 37** A woman in that town who lived a sinful life (*perhaps a prostitute*) learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. (Probably expensive. I wonder where the money came from to buy it?!)

3) **V38: 38** As she stood behind Him at His feet weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. (She's not acting sensuously; she's broken, deeply repentant, acting in pure humility. She's found the mercy & love of God! She's more aware of *Who* Jesus is that all the other invited guests!)

4) **V39: 39** When the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is--that she is a sinner." **40** Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, Teacher," he said. (Simon's about to discover Jesus is far more than a prophet.)

5) **V41-46: 41** "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, (**20 months wages**) and the other fifty (**2 months wages**). **42** Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" **43** Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. **44** Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give Me any water for My feet, but she wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. **45** You did not give Me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing My feet. **46** You did not put oil on My head, but she has poured perfume on My feet. (These were customary acts of hospitality which Simon neglected to show. Truth is, he didn't know *Who* his guest really was! Honestly, he didn't really believe Jesus was even a prophet. Simon certainly didn't see Jesus as the Messiah. And therefore he was oblivious to the fact that God was in his house, sitting at his self-righteous little dinner party!)

6) **V47: 47** Therefore, I tell you, *her many sins have been forgiven--as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.* (Note: Her act of love wasn't the cause of her forgiveness, it was the effect of her forgiveness, a visible and tangible profession of her faith! It was a worshipful act of thankfulness.)

7) **V48-49: 48** Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." **49** The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" (Only God can forgive sins!) **50** Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

G. Some noteworthy considerations:

1) Perhaps the woman had heard Jesus preach, her heart was pierced, she saw her sinfulness juxtaposed with Jesus' mercy and love. Her response was to seek out her Lord, weep at His feet, and anoint His feet with perfume and tears.

2) Jesus saw Simon's heart and the woman's heart. One heart was proud and judgmental. One heart was filled with conviction, repentance, faith and love...

3) Jesus affirms her act of love and declares her sins forgiven. And they were forgiven before He declared it! And all the angels in heaven above rejoiced that day in her salvation!

H. Next we visit the story of the Rich Young Ruler. **Mark 10:17-22** (NIV) chronicles one of the saddest of Jesus' many encounters...

1) **V17-18: 17** As Jesus started on His way, a man ran up to Him and fell on his knees before Him. "Good Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" **18** "Why do you call Me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good--except God alone. (Yes--Jesus is God and yes Jesus is good. But this man approaches Jesus as merely a 'good teacher' and not as the Chosen One, the Messiah, the Holy Son of God. And Jesus is not ready to reveal Himself otherwise.)

2) **V19-20: 19** You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" **20** "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." (In his own eyes, the young man was a law-keeper and not a lawbreaker. He was righteous in his own eyes. But **James 2:10-11** (ESV) says it best: **10** For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. **11** For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. (This man seeks affirmation of his record but he's not seeking a Savior. He's not seeking the *Only One* with the perfect law-keeping record.)

3) **V21-22: 21** Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," He said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me." **22** At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. (The invitation from Jesus is genuine but He knows the young man can't fulfill it. He's trying to help the kid see he's fallen short of the glory of God. The *fallen-short* part was already resident in his heart. The young man views his wealth as affirmation of his own record of righteousness but sadly it's brought him false hope. When you're assured of your own self-righteousness, you don't see your need for *The Righteous One*. Wealth became the young man's stumbling block, his idol. He broke the law vertically.)

I. Out of all those Jesus called to follow Him, this young man's the only one who refused. It could've just as easily been us. What's that one thing we lack? What are the many things we lack? Our idols? *Only One* lacks nothing: Jesus Christ our Lord! If He's calling you, bidding you to follow, don't refuse Him, don't say no!

J. So let's close with a parable that'll prove the perfect summation. It's told by the *Just Justifier, The Righteous One*. This story takes place at church during a time of confession and prayer. Two stand before God.

Both need a Savior but only one realizes it. The contrast is telling. The outcome is powerful. Jesus' declaration is eternal.

K. Luke 18:9-14 (NIV): **9** To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: **10** "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (**Tax collectors = sleazy traitors, dishonest practitioners of legalized thievery.**) **11** The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' **13** "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' **14** "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

* Close with Prayer...

Scriptures, Videos, & Bonus Stuff

Romans 3:21-26 (AMP)

21 But now the righteousness of God has been clearly revealed [independently and completely] apart from the Law, though it is [actually] confirmed by the Law and the [words and writings of the] Prophets. **22** This righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all those [Jew or Gentile] who believe [and trust in Him and acknowledge Him as God's Son]. There is no distinction, **23** since all have sinned and continually fall short of the glory of God, **24** and are being justified [declared free of the guilt of sin, made acceptable to God, and granted eternal life] as a gift by His [precious, undeserved] grace, through the redemption [the payment for our sin] which is [provided] in Christ Jesus, **25** whom God displayed publicly [before the eyes of the world] as a [life-giving] sacrifice of atonement and reconciliation (propitiation) by His blood [to be received] through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness [which demands punishment for sin], because in His forbearance [His deliberate restraint] He passed over the sins previously committed [before Jesus' crucifixion]. **26** It was to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the One who justifies those who have faith in Jesus [and rely confidently on Him as Savior].

Luke 7:36-50 (NIV)

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, He went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. **37** A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. **38** As she stood behind Him at His feet weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. **39** When the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is--that she is a sinner." **40** Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, Teacher," he said. **41** "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. **42** Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" **43** Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. **44** Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give Me any water for My feet, but she wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. **45** You did not give Me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing My feet. **46** You did not put oil on My head, but she has poured perfume on My feet. **47** Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." **48** Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." **49** The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" **50** Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

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Bonus Stuff

The Puddle of Their Own Merit - Brief Sermon by William Secker (Late 1600s)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ayl2_CBDaU

Self-Righteous Snobbery - R.C. Sproul - Ligonier Ministries

<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/self-righteous-snobbery/>

You're Fooling Yourself - Paul Tripp - Desiring God

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/youre-fooling-yourself>

The Making of a Modern Pharisee - Marshall Segal - Desiring God

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-making-of-a-modern-pharisee>

7 Signs That You're a Cage-Stage Calvinist - Tim Challies

https://www.challies.com/sponsored/7-signs-that-youre-a-cage-stage-calvinist/?utm_source=feedblitz&utm_medium=FeedBlitzEmail&utm_campaign=Nightly_2019-03-26_08%3a30&utm_content=5575

Isaiah 64:6-7 (NIV)

6 All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. **7** No one calls on Your name or strives to lay hold of You; for You have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.

Isaiah 61:10-11 (ESV)

10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. **11** For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

Mark 2:15-17 (ESV)

15 And as He reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and His disciples, for there were many who followed Him. **16** And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that He was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to His disciples, “Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?” **17** And when Jesus heard it, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Luke 5:27-32 (ESV)

27 After this He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” **28** And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. **29** And Levi made Him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. **30** And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” **31** And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. **32** I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Romans 10:1-4 (ESV)

1 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. **2** For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. **3** For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking

to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. **4** For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Ephesians 2:1-10 (AMP)

1 And you [He made alive when you] were [spiritually] dead and separated from Him because of your transgressions and sins, **2** in which you once walked. You were following the ways of this world [influenced by this present age], in accordance with the prince of the power of the air (Satan), the spirit who is now at work in the disobedient [the unbelieving, who fight against the purposes of God]. **3** Among these [unbelievers] we all once lived in the passions of our flesh [our behavior governed by the sinful self], indulging the desires of human nature [without the Holy Spirit] and [the impulses] of the [sinful] mind. We were, by nature, children [under the sentence] of [God's] wrath, just like the rest [of mankind]. **4** But God, being [so very] rich in mercy, because of His great and wonderful love with which He loved us, **5** even when we were [spiritually] dead and separated from Him because of our sins, He made us [spiritually] alive together with Christ (for by His grace—His undeserved favor and mercy—you have been saved from God's judgment). **6** And He raised us up together with Him [when we believed], and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, [because we are] in Christ Jesus, **7** [and He did this] so that in the ages to come He might [clearly] show the immeasurable and unsurpassed riches of His grace in [His] kindness toward us in Christ Jesus [by providing for our redemption]. **8** For it is by grace [God's remarkable compassion and favor drawing you to Christ] that you have been saved [actually delivered from judgment and given eternal life] through faith. And this [salvation] is not of yourselves [not through your own effort], but it is the [undeserved, gracious] gift of God; **9** not as a result of [your] works [nor your attempts to keep the Law], so that no one will [be able to] boast or take credit in any way [for his salvation]. **10** For we are His workmanship [His own master work, a work of art], created in Christ Jesus [reborn from above—spiritually transformed, renewed, ready to be used] for good works, which God prepared [for us] beforehand [taking paths which He set], so that we would walk in them [living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us].

Quote by William Secker

"Many have passed the rocks of gross sins--who have suffered shipwreck upon the sands of self-righteousness."

Quote by Charles Spurgeon

"The greatest enemy to human souls is the self-righteous spirit which makes men look to themselves for salvation."

Quote by Ralph Erskine

"Legal obedience hath the evil of blasphemy in it. It reproaches the righteousness of Christ, as if it were not sufficient, as if His atonement were not perfect, as if His satisfaction were not full, as if His obedience were not perfect, unless it be patched up with the rags of man's own righteousness."

Quote by C.S. Lewis

"Prostitutes are in no danger of finding their present life so satisfactory that they cannot turn to God: the proud, the avaricious, the self-righteous, are in that danger."

Quote by Jonathan Edwards

"The deceitfulness of the heart of man appears in no one thing so much as this of spiritual pride and self-righteousness. The subtlety of Satan appears in its height, in his managing persons with respect to this sin. And perhaps one reason may be that here he has most experience; he knows the way of its coming in; he is acquainted with the secret springs of it: it was his own sin. Experience gives vast advantage in leading souls, either in good or evil."

- Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*.

Quote by Tim Keller

"We tend to draw conservative, buttoned-down, moralistic people. The licentious and liberated or the broken and marginal avoid church. That can only mean one thing. If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did."

- Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, p.p. 15-16.

Quote by Charles Spurgeon

"The more unworthy you feel yourself to be, the more evidence have you that nothing but unspeakable love could have led the Lord Jesus to save such a soul as yours. The more demerit you feel, the clearer is the display of the abounding love of God in having chosen you, and called you, and made you an heir of bliss."

Quote by Adrian Rogers

"I believe that a great number of people are going to die and go to hell because they're counting on their religiosity in the church instead of their relationship with Jesus to get them to heaven. They give lip service to repentance and faith, but they've never been born again."

The Puddle of Their Own Merit!

William Secker - Circa 1660

Many have passed the rocks of gross sins—who have suffered shipwreck upon the sands of self-righteousness.

It was the saying of one, that he "would swim through a sea of brimstone—if he might but arrive safely at heaven." Ah, how would natural men soar to heaven—upon the pinions of their own merit! The sunbeams of Divine justice—will soon melt such weak and wax wings!

He who has no better righteousness than what is of his own providing, shall meet with no higher happiness than what is of his own deserving. "They disregarded the righteousness from God—and attempted to establish their own righteousness." They are determined to sail in their own ship—though they sink in the ocean!

We are so far from paying the utmost farthing, that at our utmost—we have not even a farthing to pay! That man will be a miserable spectacle of vanity—who stands upon the lame feet of his own ability!

Duties are but dry pits, though ever so meticulously wrought—until Christ fills them. Reader, I would neither have you be idle in duties—nor make an idol of duties.

What are duties without Christ—but like a fine cabinet without a jewel—or a golden cup without a cordial? The most diligent saint—has been the most self-distrusting saint, "that I may gain Christ and be found in him—not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." If you are found in your own righteousness, you will be lost by your own righteousness. That garment which was worn to shreds on Adam's back—will never make a complete covering for you.

Duties may be good crutches to go upon—but they are bad Christs to lean upon. It is the greatest disparagement that professors can offer to Christ—to put their services in the scale with His sufferings. The beggarly rags of the first Adam—must never be put on with the princely robe of the second Adam!

Man is a creature too much inclined to warm himself by the sparks of his own fire—though he lies down in eternal flames for kindling them! Though Noah's dove made use of her wings—yet she found no rest, but in the ark. Duties can never have too much of our diligence—or too little of our confidence. A believer does not perform good works to live—but he lives to perform good works.

He shall have hell as his debt—who will not take heaven as a gift. "We boast in Christ Jesus, and do not put confidence in the flesh." A true Christian stands at as great distance from trusting in the best of his services—as in the worst of his sins! He knows that the greatest part of his holiness—will not make the least part of his justifying righteousness. He has unreservedly subscribed to that sentiment, "that when we have done all—we are only unprofitable servants."

When we have kept all the commandments, there is one commandment above all to be kept; that is, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags!" In most of our works—we are abominable sinners; and in the best of our works—we are unprofitable servants. "O Sovereign Lord, I will proclaim Your righteousness, Yours alone!" You see, beloved, the righteousness of Christ is to be magnified—when the righteousness of a Christian is not to be mentioned.

It is hard for us to be "nothing in ourselves" amidst all our works; and to be "all things in Christ," amidst all our weakness. To undertake every duty—and yet to overlook every duty—is a lesson which none can learn, but Christ's scholars.

Our obedience, at best, is like good wine—which relishes of a bad cask. The 'Law of God' will not accept ninety-nine for a hundred. It will not accept the coin of our obedience, either short in quantity—or base in quality. The duty it exacts—is as impossible to be performed in this our fallen state; as the penalty it inflicts—is intolerable to be endured in our eternal state!

We do not sail to glory in the salt sea of our own tears—but in the red sea of the Redeemer's blood! The Cross of Christ—is the only key of paradise! We owe the life of our souls—to the death of our Savior. It was His going into the fiery furnace—which keeps us from going into the devouring flames! Man lives—by death: his natural life is preserved by the death of the creature; and his spiritual life is gained by the death of the Redeemer.

Those who carry their vessel of hope to the puddle of their own merit—will never draw the water of comfort, from the fountain of God's mercy!

Spiritual Fruit vs Self-Righteous Works

by Melissa Kruger / The Gospel Coalition / September 22, 2015

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/melissa-kruger/spiritual-fruit-vs-self-righteous-works-2/>

Picture with me for a moment two trees in the distance. Both are heavy laden with apples. The natural assumption is that you've come upon two apple trees.

However, once you arrive at the base of the trees, you notice that they differ in one very important way. On the first tree, apples hang naturally from the stem, just as you'd expect. The second tree causes you to look again in bewilderment.

All of the apples on this tree have been tied onto it.

Painstakingly, someone spent hours attempting to make this tree appear to be an apple tree. Close inspection reveals the reality that the fruit was not born from the inward sap of the tree, but from the outward labors of someone seeking to create an illusion.

We can all spot the futility of such labor in an apple orchard (knowing full well that hanging apples on a tree does not an apple tree make). However, I have a feeling this might be how many of us go about our attempts to bear fruit in our spiritual lives.

[Galatians 5:22-23](#) tells us, *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*

These graces show forth the beauty of the Spirit's work in the life of a believer. The sap of the Spirit produces fruit in the life of a Christian. Yet, each of us will find ourselves in situations where we feel unloving, impatient, unkind, or lacking in joy or self-control (all of which may have occurred on this morning's drive to the office).

Faced with our own barren tree, we often attempt to achieve in our own strength what is not growing in our hearts. We determine that we will act lovingly to that unlovable person, be kind to that annoying relative, or faithfully serve in that ministry (while grumbling to ourselves about it). We will work harder, be more disciplined, and pick ourselves up by our proverbial bootstraps and get on with it.

Now, let me clarify. Hard work, discipline, and diligent labors are good things. Even Paul said, *"I worked harder than any of them"* ([1 Cor 15:10](#)). But then, lest he be misunderstood, he rightly added, *"though it is not I, but the grace of God that was with me."* It is the work of God's grace, through the power of the Spirit, that fuels our obedience.

Thus, the question before us as we ponder spiritual fruit is: How can I discern the difference between keeping in step with the Spirit's work in my life and laboring in my own strengths and abilities?

Righteousness with Strings Attached

Just like the tied-on fruit tree, when I am working out of my own strength the false fruit comes with strings attached. Two strings of self-righteousness appear, making it clear to any close observer that these are not Spirit-born fruit. The first string is judgment and the second string is despair.

When I've labored in my own strength and find myself somewhat successful in my efforts, the most common overflow is that of judgment. Observing another struggling to do what I've attained, it's tempting to sit high on my perch and think to myself, "Well if she just did this or that, then it would go much better for her." Thankfully, the Lord has faithfully nudged me off my perch more times than I can count. Falling face forward in the dust has a way of dismantling pride and self-righteousness. Judgment is an ugly string, exposing the illusion of fruit on our tree.

In contrast, when I've labored in my own abilities and come up short or missed the mark in some way, a second string appears. It's the string of despair. How can it be that I'm such a horrible person? I'm a failure of a Christian. What use am I for the kingdom? Everyone is better than me. These are not the thoughts of a humble soul, but a self-righteous one. Should I be surprised at my own inabilities or weaknesses? My false belief that I'm not really that bad is shocked by my complete inability to change apart from the Spirit's work. Despair is simply the other side of judgment in the currency of self-righteousness.

Spirit-Born Fruit

In contrast, how can we spot the fruit that is born of the Spirit's work in our lives? Like a painter, the Master puts a signature on His creation:

The work of the Spirit always overflows in worship.

When we find ourselves living lives of obedience, showing forth joy and patience, kindness and love, our hearts abound with thanksgiving. We rejoice, not in our own righteousness, but in the work of the Spirit within us.

There is no judgment for others because we recognize all our works are simply a gift born within us. We do not look down on others who are struggling; we just keep inviting them to Jesus. With a heart of worship, we say to all: Come behold the King! I was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind, but now I see. The scar of prideful judgment does not mar the glow of a worshiping countenance.

In a similar way, when faced with our failures, the Spirit prevents us from despairing thoughts and inward focus. Instead, we repent and turn again to Christ in worship. Rather than become paralyzed by our sin, we behold the work of Jesus in new ways. We mourn our sin, and we rejoice all the more in our Savior. All our failures are absorbed in His sacrifice. With confidence, we boldly approach the throne of grace, finding mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

This type of fruit is only born by abiding in Jesus ([John 15:4-5](#)). There's no need to spend our labors tying on fruit. What we yearn for, He freely gives. As the Master Gardener tends our branch, we overflow in worship and bear the beauty of our Creator:

"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in My God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." – [Isaiah 61:10](#)