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FOR THOSE WHO LOVE THE TRUTH AND HATE ERROR

From *The Contending For The Faith Archives* . . .

RIGHTEOUSNESSES AS FILTHY RAGS

L. W. Mayo

How many of you, who read this article, have heard a preacher, Bible class teacher, or some man, even an elder, say when preaching, teaching, or praying words to this effect. “After we have done our very best to live the Christian life and have served God to the extent of our abilities to do so, still our righteousness is as filthy rags in the sight of God”? I could not count the number of times I have heard almost, if not exactly, those very words said in a sermon or in a prayer. For a long time I wondered, as a boy, what they meant, and where they found any such teaching in the Bible.

After several years and when I had had the opportunity to read the Bible completely through, I found the passage on which that statement is based. It is true that almost every time that statement was made the one preaching, teaching, or praying was setting forth the truth that we are not saved solely by our own works and efforts. They were laboring to show that we will not be able to *earn* a home in heaven by our own deeds. Of course, Ephesians 2:8-10, Titus 2:5 and a multitude of other passages teach this truth. After it is all said and done, we must depend on the grace and mercy of God and the sacrifice of Christ to save us.

Even though it is true that we do **“work out our own salvation with fear and trembling”** (Philippians 2:12), we still do not and cannot *earn* salvation by our good deeds. The value of salvation is *far beyond* the value of all that we may or can do so far as human effort is

concerned. We *still* must rely upon the grace of God to be saved, and to God we will have to give all the glory when we reach heaven as our eternal home.

However, for one to say that “When we have done our very best to serve the Lord, and have lived the very best that we can, that our righteousness is still AS FILTHY RAGS” in the sight of God is not the truth.

I have heard men say “Our righteousness is as filthy rags” many times, but till this day I have not heard one of them give the passage of scripture where such a verse is found. However, any one who knows much about the Bible knows that the verse to which they refer is found in Isaiah 64:6. The verse in the King James reads, **“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities like the wind, have taken us away.”** The *ASV* renders the clause under consideration **“all our righteousnesses are as a polluted garment.”**

I believe it was Kipling who said, “I had six honest serving men, They taught me all I knew. Their names were WHAT and WHY and WHEN, and HOW and WHERE and WHO.” As an attempt to arrive at just exactly what Isaiah was teaching in Isaiah 64:6, we need to apply a few of the poet’s “honest serving men.” Just WHAT is said we have already observed. But when we look at WHY it was said, the matter becomes much clearer.

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**Ira Y. Rice, Jr., Founder
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It is true that the prophet stated frankly that **“our righteousnesses are as filthy rags,”** but *of whom was he speaking* when he used the pronoun “our”?

The prophet began his ministry as a prophet in the year that King Uzziah died, which was about 740 B.C. He prophesied about Judah and Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:1). The section of his prophecy in which our text is found is the first of the last three sections of Isaiah’s closing prophecies. This section covers the 63rd and 64th chapters. In this section Isaiah prophesied against **“the house of Israel”** (Isaiah 63:7). Israel was in severe apostasy. God, through the prophet, had declared, **“for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. For the day of vengeance is in my heart”** (Isaiah 63:3). Also he said, **“And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth”** (Isaiah 63:6). Israel was a people that had **“rebelled, and vexed his holy spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them”** (Isaiah 63:10). God had led those people by the hand of Moses and had brought them up out of the sea (Isaiah 63:11,12). Isaiah recognized that God was the Father of Israel through Abraham (63:16). They were a people who had possessed the blessings of God that were promised to them **“but a little while”** (63:18). Just a casual reader will observe upon reading Isaiah chapters 63 and 64, that the prophecy there is addressed to Israel in a state of apostasy. She had gone into all kinds of evil as worshipping idols as Moses had told them that they would do in Deuteronomy 29:17. It would be to belabor the point to endeavor to prove further that the language of Isaiah in these two chapters is directed to an apostate nation of people, namely Israel. Their religious lives were described as **“righteousnesses”** (plural). There was the practice of idolatrous worship, and some who partly worshipped God. This is why the word *righteousnesses* occurs in the plural. Their lives were polluted before the Lord, and Isaiah was so confessing this to be true.

LANGUAGE NOT APPLICABLE TODAY

The language of Isaiah 64:6 in no way applies to Christians today who are honestly and sincerely doing their best to serve the Lord. Nor does that language include those who during the age of national Israel were faithful in their service to God. Ezekiel speaks of a type of righteousness that a man could possess and it would

keep him from being lost (Ezekiel 18:14). This is not the same kind of “**righteousness**” that Isaiah refers to as “**FILTHY RAGS.**”

Now, let’s take a look at Isaiah 64:6 and determine just what kind of service to the Lord the children of Israel were trying to palm off on the Lord, which service would properly be described as “**FILTHY RAGS.**”

When it has been determined exactly to what Isaiah was comparing the righteousness of Israel, it seems to me that a preacher or any one else would blush with shame to so apply the best efforts of God-fearing and God-serving people to such a thing. A man certainly has no respect for his own Christianity who will say “my righteousness is as filthy rags” before the Lord, and then state that the Bible teaches such a thing.

TO WHAT DOES “FILTHY RAGS” REFER?

On Isaiah 64:6 **Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown** say :

unclean thing—legally unclean, as a leper. True of Israel, everywhere now cut off by unbelief and by God’s judgments from the congregation of the saints.

righteousness—plural, “uncleanness” extended to every particular act of theirs, even to their prayers and praises. True of the best doings of the unregenerate (Phi. 3:6-8; Tit. 1:15; Heb. 11:6).

filthy rags—literally, a “menstruous rag” (Lev. 15:33; 20:18; Lam. 1:17).

Adam Clarke says:

If preachers knew properly the meaning of this word, would they make such a liberal use of it in their public ministry? And why should any use a word, the meaning of which he does not understand? How many in the congregation blush for the incautious man and his “**FILTHY RAGS?**”

Just before this comment, **Clarke** had quoted an “Old MS Bible,” which said, “And we ben made as unclene alle we: and as the cloth of the woman rotten blode flowing: all our righteousness.” No wonder then that **Clarke** expressed such an opinion of preachers who would use this passage so loosely.

C. F. Keil and **F. Delitzsch**, in their commentary on Isaiah 64:6, have the following to say. “The people who ask the question in ver. 5 do not regard themselves worthy of redemption, as their self-righteousness has been so thoroughly put to shame. ver. (6)” Here **Keil &**

Delitzsch give their rendering of Isaiah 64:6:

We all became like the unclean thing, and all our virtues like a garment soiled with blood; and we all faded away together like the leaves; and our iniquities like the storm they carried us away.

Then they comment:

The whole nation is like one whom the law pronounces unclean, like a leper, who has to cry “*tâmē, tâmē*” as he goes along, that men may get out of his way (Leviticus 13:45). Doing right in all its manifold forms (*tsedâqōth*, like Isaiah 33:15, used elsewhere of the manifestations of divine righteousness), which once made Israel well-pleasing to God (Isaiah 1:21), has disappeared and become like a garment stained with menstruous discharge (cf., Ezekiel 36:17); (Vol. 7 page 470).

The “**FILTHY RAGS**” of Isaiah 64:6 were rags that were hygienically and ceremonially (according to the Law) unclean. Cloths of such nature were not to be touched lest the one touching them would become unclean in the eyes of God. Surely it is not so that when a child of God, in this Christian age, has and is doing his very best to live the Christian life, he has obeyed the gospel from the heart and has been made free from sin (Romans 6:17,18). He has been washed in the blood of Christ, and has dedicated his life to the Lord, and is now living the very best he can learn how. He prays without ceasing, and carefully studies to show himself approved unto God so that he can live better each passing day—surely his life before God is not “**RIGHTEOUSNESSES AS FILTHY RAGS.**” His life is neither unclean according to the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, nor would one become unclean to touch him. His life is not as rags that are both ceremonially and hygienically unclean.

In Isaiah 35:9 the prophet speaks of a way upon which the redeemed will walk. Would preachers who speak of our righteousness as filthy rags also speak of the redeemed life with such a simile? Are redeemed lives ceremonially, according to the law, and hygienically unclean? Jesus spoke of those to whom He would say “**well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many. Enter thou into the joys of thy Lord**” (Matthew 25:21, 32). Are we to classify those to whom the Lord will say “**well done, thou good and faithful servant**” that his righteousness is as “**filthy**

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raggs” before the Lord?

In Revelation 7:14 the saved are described as **“These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** Are we to speak of these also as those whose righteousness is as **“FILTHY RAGS”** in the sight of God? Surely not! It is freely admitted that we could not *earn* a home with God and our Lord Jesus Christ in the “Land That Is Fairer Than Day.” It is true that when we have labored daily in the vineyard of the Lord, and truly have borne the heat and burden of the day that still eternal life will be a gift to us. But, there is a level of man’s being faithful to God and an extent to which he does the Lord’s will that the Lord will accept, and that with which He will be pleased, even well pleased. But Isaiah was not speaking of any such devotion, service, and dedication when he confessed to God that the **“righteousnesses”** of apostatized Israel were as **“filthy raggs.”** For us to say that our very best efforts to serve the Lord, and the actual laying of our bodies upon the altar of sacrifice (Romans 12:1) that *still* God looks upon us as that which is repulsive and not fit to be touched by the

hands of men or angels is to place our loving and merciful heavenly Father to the level of, and in the same with, the imaginary gods of the heathen who are thought of as those whose anger cannot be satisfied and whose approval His devotees cannot obtain. Can you imagine the Lord Jesus Christ standing at the gate of heaven and greeting the faithful with “enter in, you who are as filthy raggs”?

Across the more than 50 years of my life as a preacher I have heard men whom I thought to be well informed say, “After we have done all that we can, and have done our best to do the will of the Lord, still our righteousness is as filthy raggs in His sight.” Just lately I have heard no less than three of our preachers, who are preachers on radio programs, say that our righteousness is as filthy raggs in the sight of God. It is my firm conviction that such brethren should inform themselves on what the teaching of Isaiah 64:6 is, and be ashamed that they have made such a blunder before the masses of people who listen to them on the radio and from the pulpit.

—Deceased