**Filthy Rags**

*Isaiah 64:6*

**Introduction**

1. It is a sobering thought that what we think is a service of righteousness we offer God could be something which separates us from Him – **Isaiah 64:6**
   1. Unclean/filthy rags – thus, unable to approach God – **Haggai 2:12-14**
   2. Fade as a leaf, carried away by wind – spiritual weakness, and driven away from God – **Psalm 1:4**
2. This does not mean what the world would have us to think.
3. However, it does warn us about an approach to God in vanity which would not result in any good, but in separation from Him.
4. How might ***“our righteousnesses [be] like filthy rags?” (“righteous deeds,” NASB***)
5. The Text
6. Abuse
   1. “Sin is the defilement which a fallen nature imparts to all we do…So, even what we might consider to be in our favour, righteous acts, partake of the defilement of fallenness.” (Motyer, J. Alec, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)
   2. “Even our few good works in which there is real excellence, as fruits of the Spirit, are so defective and defiled as done by us, that they need to be washed in the fountain open for sin and uncleanness.” (Matthew Henry)
   3. “In the best deeds of the best men there is some taint of evil. As Hooker says, ‘Our very repentances require to be repented of.’” (Pulpit Commentary)
   4. **Consequence – everything we do, even when in sincere obedience to exactly what God commands, is uncleanness/sin/unrighteousness.**
      1. God says, “Do good” – **Hebrews 13:16** – but He is not pleased.
      2. God says, “Offer pure and undefiled religion” – **James 1:27** – but it is impure, and defiled.
      3. God says, “Offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to Me” – **1 Peter 2:5** – but they are unacceptable.
      4. God says, “Do all to My glory” – **1 Corinthians 10:31** – but it does not glorify Me.
      5. THIS IS NONSENSE.
   5. NOTE: In no way do we merit favor before God. This is why it is called favor, and not debt. This does not mean we cannot DO something which pleases God.
7. The Text in Context
   1. How Judah/Jerusalem was before – **Isaiah 1:21** – were they faithful at once? Just? Righteous?
      1. Can they be again? – **Isaiah 1:16-17**
   2. Context – Babylonian captivity to take place as judgment for unrighteousness.
      1. A plea for God’s presence and mercy – **Isaiah 64:1-3**
      2. He acts for those who wait for Him – **(v. 4)** – faith.
      3. He meets one who does righteousness – **(v. 5a**) – fellowship through obedient faith.
      4. What is the problem?
         1. **(v. 5b)** – we have sinned, and we continue in it – ***“We continued in them a long time; And shall we be saved?”*** (NASB – i.e. can we be saved as we continue in this state?)
         2. **(v. 6)** – righteous deeds as filthy rags = iniquities taken us away.
         3. (**v. 7)** – none call on Your name, consumed because of iniquity.
         4. **Isaiah 65:2** – rebellious people walking according to own thoughts.
      5. The context describes how God finds favor with those who do His will – work righteousness – but His separation from those who do the opposite.
   3. **Ezekiel 18:20; 1 John 3:7-8** – those who do righteous are righteous, and those who sin are sinful.
   4. Why are their “righteousnesses…like filthy rags?” Examples:
      1. Empty ritualism – **Isaiah 1:10-11** – worship offered by Sodom and Gomorrah is meaningless to God.
      2. Unrequested fast (self-prescribed righteousness) – **Isaiah 58:1-5** – service God has not asked for.
      3. **NOT that even when we do what God asks us to do in faith that it is meaningless, useless, and as unrighteousness to Him – “filthy rags”.**
8. **There are things we can do that please God. There are “righteous deeds” which God finds pleasant, and acceptable. However, there are “righteous deeds” which are as “filthy rags” – they are not true righteousnesses.**
9. Filthy Rags
10. Prior Righteousness
    1. Intended meaning of “prior” – past, no longer, ceased, not present righteousness.
    2. God does not forget our previous good work – **Hebrews 6:9-12** – but it is recalled for encouragement to persist in it, not as a once for all action.
    3. We should remember previous good so we can maintain it, or restore it – **Revelation 2:4-5** – “from where” – i.e. remember where you were (that was good); “first works” – those you did initially, before.
    4. **Luke 9:62** – looking back is not fit for the kingdom – **Philippians 3:13-14**
    5. To cease to work righteousness is to nullify it – **Ezekiel 18:24**
    6. If we haven’t been given our rest we should still be working righteousness – **Hebrews 4:9-10** – to cease from works before the time for rest is to forfeit the rest.
    7. “You’re only a success for the moment that you complete a successful act.” – Phil Jackson
11. Hypocritical Righteousness
    1. Disciples warned of the leaven of hypocrisy – **Luke 12:1-3**
       1. **(vv. 2-3)** – God does not just see what is revealed by us, but also what is hidden.
       2. **Hebrews 4:13** – all things are exposed to Him.
    2. Rather – **Matthew 23:2-3** – as they teach Moses’ law, obey, but do not follow their example because they are hypocrites.
       1. **(v. 4)** – they enforce strict laws (outside of Moses’ law) as a show of righteousness, but don’t actually observe it.
       2. There is a danger of pursuing a feeling of righteousness by attempting to eclipse your unrighteousness by pointing out fault in others – **Matthew 7:1-5** – not to dissuade accountability, but hypocrisy.
    3. Our “righteous deeds” can easily become “filthy rags” by opposite actions – **Galatians 2:11-14**
       1. ***“not straightforward about the truth of the gospel” – “when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel” (ESV)***
       2. I.e. their actions were the opposite of their messaged preached.
       3. ***“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them…” (1 Timothy 4:16***). (Preaching the gospel truth is a “filthy rag” if it is without fitting conduct.)
12. Self-Righteousness
    1. Self-righteousness is ultimately self-made righteousness – **cf. Colossians 2:23** – ***“self-imposed religion”*** – idiosyncratic religion.
    2. Self-made as self-prescribed:
       1. **Isaiah 58:3-9** – a fast the Lord did not ask for.
          1. **Joel 2:12-14** – rend heart, not garments.
       2. **Luke 18:9-12** – trusting in self as righteous – **(v. 12** – fasting and tithing beyond what God required)
       3. As the Jews were guilty in rejecting Christ, and holding onto the law – **Romans 9:31-32; Philippians 3:9** – righteousness from God is by faith.
          1. **Any promotion of salvation through error is a “filthy rag” – sacrament, faith only, imputation, intellectualism (Gnosticism), asceticism, lewd grace, etc.**
    3. Self-made as perceived as earned:
       1. Right action with wrong motive/perception is a “filthy rag” – **Psalm 50:8, 12** – offering sacrifice with the notion that He needs it.
       2. **Luke 15:29-32** – the older brother had stayed home, served his father, and his father admitted he was “always with me.”
          1. Pharisees not fully represented here – they think they are doing right, but are actually not in most cases.
          2. Though, even if they were doing everything right, HAVING THIS PRIDE MAKES THEIR RIGHTEOUSNESSES AS “FILTHY RAGS.”
       3. **Luke 17:7-10** – ***“We are unprofitable servants…”***
13. Nominal Righteousness
    1. Wearing a name means nothing if we do not live by what the name represents.
       1. Nominal discipleship is not discipleship, but sacrilege.
       2. Israel was guilty of this – **Ezekiel 36:16-21** – had the name as belonging to God but acted as the heathen.
    2. Israel of the 1st century:
       1. **Matthew 3:7-10** – they must not rely on their fleshly lineage, but repent.
       2. **Romans 9:1-5** – God used physical Israel to bring about good, but they would not be saved for their flesh. (**v. 6** – they are not all Israel who are of Israel…)
    3. Christians – **Acts 11:26** – disciples (those who are devoted to learning from and applying their teacher’s doctrine and imitating their teacher’s life) are called Christians. (The name itself means nothing, but only the life lived in congruence with it.)
    4. Having a name means nothing if your actions speak otherwise – **Revelation 3:1**

**Conclusion**

1. We must be vigilant so that we avoid our righteousness becoming as a filthy rag.
2. When we do as God commands by faith, the sacrifice of righteousness is pleasing to Him.
3. However, all else is as “filthy rags.”