

The Square Cannon

When I was about six years old, the Civil War Centennial celebration began, and I became quite an enthusiast. During this time, I decided that I would build a cannon to use in my mock battles. I didn't really have any suitable materials, so I had to take four flat boards and build a cannon with a square cross section. It sounds ridiculous, but using my imagination I could get by with something that was only the impression of the real thing. This is what creative play is all about.

This ability to be satisfied with an illusion of what is really the truth affect us sometimes in the way that we live our lives. We may be able to deal with the illusion temporarily in such a way that we are happy with it, but in some higher sense we know that it really isn't real.

In addition to a fine cannon, I had a Confederate General's shirt that my mom made me. It had a stripe down the sleeve and everything. The wearing of a uniform enhanced the feeling that I was really playing a part of some actual character. I didn't have to have the pants, or the shoes, or the gloves; the shirt was enough in my play-acting.

When we think of the word 'hypocrite', we think of someone who is just playing a part, who pretends to be something that he isn't. Does this definition apply to my childhood play? Does it apply to adults who wear full Civil War uniforms in a re-enactment event? Or is there something more fundamental to be considered?

As a child General, I would have loved to have an army at my command, with soldiers who respectfully looked to me for their battle orders. But I knew that it was all make-believe, and I could let it go at the end of the day. Similarly, the re-enactors may have temporary command, but they also know that it vaporizes at the end of the weekend.

The key is what have in our heart, and whether we pretend to be righteous in order to feel superior to others. I knew that my shirt and my cannon were not real and therefore not worth very much. But sometimes when we think of our spiritual worth, we forget that we are no better than anyone else. We try to maintain the illusion of righteousness; but to others we are like the emperor who wore no clothes.

Are we pretending to be Christians? And in doing that, do we look as absurd to the world as someone playing with a square cannon? In the show that we put on, and in our efforts to act out the part of being a child of God, we may look just as silly. I hope that we can understand why.

The illusion of improvement

There is a prominent philosophy in the field of management that I just have to mention. It is what I call the "illusion of improvement". You have all seen it, I know. We have to act like our product is better than before so that we can compete. So, no matter how good it really is, we have to claim an improvement. So, we change the name, we add a special ingredient, or we otherwise advertise our "new and improved" product. Even if the product is no good, like perhaps your favorite football team, you can instill new life for a few years by hiring a new coach. If you keep hiring coaches, you give the illusion of progress. But you just can't sell the status quo.

We must make sure that we are not trying to "sell" righteousness in the same way. We can't fool God about our true nature. And we can't always fool other people either!

Other Illusions

God makes some pretty strong statements about our efforts to create the illusion of righteousness. Many times in the Old Testament, such as in Amos 5:21, He claims to hate what we are doing when we only pretend to worship Him. God is not fooled by human illusion.

He warns us to not be fooled by the illusion of righteousness in Matthew 7:15:

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

What a striking image this is! But what is really inside shows through if you just keep looking hard enough, and Jesus continues in this vein in verse 17:

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

The brother of the Prodigal Son also shows the illusion of righteousness, for his true nature is revealed when something truly Good happens – like when his lost brother returns (Luke 15:28-30):

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

The brother had given the illusion of righteousness, working as he was supposed to all of his life, but inside he was actually very selfish and petty.

The Pharisees

The illusion is not necessarily a purposely crafted thing. The Pharisee, for instance, could comprehend how he appeared to others, and how he had dirtied the waters (Ezekiel 34). He could not understand how he had missed the point when he was so actively pursuing the form or the legal structure. He saw the righteousness as something concrete, and he could not understand that he had missed the point. It is very difficult to convince such people that this is not what God really wants.

The twenty-third chapter of Matthew is all about the illusion of righteousness. Look at some excerpts from that passage to show what Christ is emphasizing:

(Matthew 23:3b) ... do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. (Matthew 23:5a) "Everything they do is done for men to see... (Matthew 23:6) they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; (Matthew 23:7) they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.' (Matthew 23:15) "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. (Matthew 23:23b) ... you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matthew 23:28) ...**on the outside you appear to people as righteous** but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Too many times we see that structure, and we latch on to it like it is a lifesaver. We grab it with our hands, and then we cannot let go of it. We try to wrap our hands around everything, and take as much as we can carry. It reminds me of the story of how you catch a monkey. You simply give him a narrow-mouth jar full of peanuts! He puts his hand in to get some, and because he is so greedy he cannot get his hand out with it full of peanuts. He refuses to let go of enough of the peanuts to allow him to escape.

Those who are acting, showing off, are trying to embrace, to grab, to collect, everything in one trip. This makes it impossible to do anything else without worrying about a package falling, or dropping the whole thing; so your grip is so tight that you are ineffective at anything else.

Total Popularity – Wanting it All

There is the same image when we want to have everybody impressed with our righteousness. You cannot wrap your arms around everything without losing something.

We can see the frustration of trying to do things for show, and not ever being able to have every one love or respect you. You cannot be all things to all people: only Christ can. Many people try to spread themselves too thin and end up not nurturing the relationships that mean the most. It's like they want to plug into every outlet in the county. People who hunger for attention

in this way cannot possibly be truly happy; their desire is not for the Lord. And Jesus says that we will be paid in full if this is what we seek.

Jesus did not worry about every one loving Him; although he desired it, he would not change his standards to achieve it. He was the personification of truth, and not an illusion.

Wanting it all, but only treating certain people right

Fortunately, Christ also shows the appearance of **true righteousness**:

(Matthew 23:11-12) *The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

This is perfectly clear, but many of us are not willing to play the part of a background player. We want the limelight, and the attention that goes with it.

Treating everybody the same

Those who only create the illusion of righteousness do not treat everyone the same, as they would if they truly understood the love of Christ. They are not truly servants of everyone. The 'picture' of a person becomes clear when you watch how they behave towards others, especially fellow Christians. You can see that the agenda of a real Christian is love, not power or position.

A common theme for those with only the illusion is that of judgment, a superior attitude that points out the sins of others on a regular basis. Those who do that simply do not understand their own condition of sin. None of us are in a very good position to reprove or correct. So why do we think that we are better than others? Or that our sins have a much lower punishment priority than those that we condemn? Why is it that it is always the "Christians" that make you cry?

If someone accuses us, we must realize that they are sinners just as bad as we are. We know that God is the ultimate judge, and we should not let anyone else bother us without looking very critically at that person's credibility. If we respect them, then their opinion may mean something to us. But most of the people I know that criticize frequently aren't credible!

One of the most powerful parables in the New Testament is that of the unforgiving servant. It shows how carefully we must think about the sins of other people.

A still, small voice

Those who present only the illusion of righteousness are like the ____ gong or clanging cymbal that Paul talked about in 1 Corinthians 13. They are, as Shakespeare said, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing!" Finding the truth at the core of this distraction reminds me of the time when God showed himself to Elijah. Look at the various ways in which God presented Himself, in 1 Kings 19:9-13:

There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

We see that God purposefully showed Elijah that he was not in the flashy or showy things such as the wind or earthquake, but in a still small voice.

We see many who want to make a great impact on others, and they make a big splash about how important they are. But this is almost always an illusion. The truly spiritual perform their Christian duties in a quiet but powerful way.

There was no illusion at the cross

We believe with all of our hearts that the love of Christ was not an illusion. Jesus did not mask or impersonate God, but He came to reveal God in all of His glory. He was the full representation of Righteousness, as we see in the following scriptures:

(Hebrews 1:3) The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

(Colossians 1:19) For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,

(Colossians 2:9) For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,

This righteousness was REAL! There was no illusion to it. He was actually the embodiment of Goodness, so as to show mankind what it is really like.

Conclusion

God continually encourages us to be like Him, and to act like Him. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus tells us to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect". God knows that we cannot achieve perfection, but He still wants us to strive for that goal. This is not hypocrisy in and of itself. We must make sure that we realize our place, and not make others feel worthless in our own pursuit of righteousness.

The beauty of Grace is that if we are sincerely playing the part, God will transform us into something real, like in the story of the Velveteen Rabbit. We are made perfect by the way God loves us, and He then treats us as though we are righteous. We may still look silly to others, but to God we are no longer an illusion. We have become His.

(Prov 26:23 NIV) Like a coating of glaze over earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart.