

Isn't it crazy when people insist that holding certain opinions or belonging to a particular group makes one a good person? I'm sure you can think of examples of people indulging in this cheap self-righteousness, but do any of those examples include you? Because it's a rare person who has never lapsed into this thinking, so naturally does it come to us.

In all fairness, there's no point in beating ourselves up for admitting that we think we're better than the people we disagree with, since that propensity is a consequence of our evolution as a tribal species. For most of our time on this planet, human beings have organized ourselves as kinship groups which are competitive with each other, sometimes violently so. Assuming one's right to overcome members of other groups was simply part of survival in the primitive world, and humans were primitive for much longer than we've been civilized. And if we can even call ourselves civilized now, I would say, could be a matter of debate.

We might be tempted to divide today's readings into "good" and "bad" categories too. The Old Testament passages strike a hopeful note, presenting a vision of God ushering in an idealized reign of peace and universal prosperity, and then St. Paul points out that God would include both Jews and Gentiles in the joyful relationship God intends for humanity.

But then there's this jarring Gospel passage — some well-meaning people would split the Old Testament and Paul into "Bad" and the rest of the New Testament into "Good," but that's as superficial as it is tragic — today's Gospel passage is hard to read, and harder still if you know what ancient people believed about the reproductive cycle of vipers. It's pretty gross, so I probably shouldn't mention it... All right, I'll tell you. It's *not true*, but in those days "newborn vipers were *believed* to eat through their mother's stomach, killing her."* We may sometimes disparage groups we don't like, but when someone in the Bible calls a group of people a "brood of vipers," it's worse than anything we commonly say to attack people.

Anyway, these readings only seem like they're opposed to each other until we remember that creating a better world must entail eliminating some bad stuff. Cleaning out the fridge means throwing out spoiled food. Before you can bake bread, you have to separate the wheat from the chaff. Building a glorious dwelling, or pretty much any building, means creating a level site and cutting down some trees or displacing whatever had been living there. So, building a better world, a just society, means that some bad behaviors have to stop: exploitation, oppression, hoarding, callousness. Isaiah describes a king who favors the poor and the meek, and John the Baptist points out that this has implications for the rich and the grandiose.

So, what specifically did the Pharisees and Sadducees do to provoke John the Baptist to use such an extreme epithet against them? I have no idea if they were materially rich. Probably some of them were, some of them weren't. But spiritually they were grandiose, and on a thin resume. That is to say, apparently they believed that their

status as descendants of Abraham made them “good,” or at least, good enough that they did not need to bear the fruit of practicing the good works that God commanded the descendants of Abraham to perform. John the Baptist was having none of it.

But he also did more than denounce. He spoke harshly, but like any prophet, his goal was not condemnation, but rather, repentance. He didn’t want anything bad to happen to the Pharisees and Sadducees; he wanted them to do good and embrace humility in order to enjoy the joy and fulfillment of a right relationship with God. He spoke with a sense of urgency because God was acting imminently in his own life to make that relationship newly accessible.

For us too, the message is urgent. God wants us to live our own best lives, and we can only do that by being in right relationship with God. And that means getting rid of the selfishness, negativity, and distractions that separate us from God, burning them like chaff, and bearing fruit worthy repentance, that is, doing things that will actually help other people. One of the greatest distractions we face today is the same one John the Baptist pointed out, our belief that our opinions or our sense of affiliation with particular factions somehow make us righteous. But righteousness comes from our relationship to God, and the extent to which we let God transform us. Our belief to the contrary poisons our spiritual life the same way carbon monoxide poisons our bodies, taking the place of oxygen but delivering none of the life-sustaining functions.

So John the Baptist sounds the alarm, and points us to the life-giving solution. “One who is more powerful than I is coming after me... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” The antidote to our inclination to self-righteousness... is a passion for *actual* righteousness. When John and Isaiah talk about preparing the way of the Lord, making his paths straight, they aren’t talking about civil engineering. They’re talking about the much more difficult and dangerous work of reshaping our own souls and the world around us. Rather than lazily proclaiming our own goodness, we should be working hard at making both ourselves and our surroundings better. Not because Jesus won’t come unless we do, but because he *is* coming no matter *what* we do.

While he is gracious, loving, and merciful, and he will show those qualities to us, Jesus can also show those qualities toward the people we would put down or ignore. If we have been ungracious to others, Jesus can demonstrate his love to *them* by calling *us* to account. Jesus will not be impressed by our opinions, but if we have genuinely worked on ourselves to be more gracious, especially toward those we have the hardest time being gracious to, and if we have worked on making the world more gracious for the most vulnerable, Jesus might well greet us by saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

And divine intervention in the world has already begun, in a profoundly gracious way. The divine goal is not to judge us, but to bless us, if we will receive God’s blessing. God wants to guide us in the paths of righteousness. In sending Jesus to us, God has opened a window from heaven to earth and the fresh air of the Holy Spirit has begun to

blow in. Come close and breathe deeply, and let the Spirit refresh you, heal you, and strengthen you into the fully living, loving, gracious being God always intended you to be.

*Comment on Matthew 3:7 in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 6.