

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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I Am Holier Than You!

Self-righteousness is often portrayed as a product of religion. In fact, some of the most self-righteous people in the world have no religion at all.

“I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, . . . who say, ‘Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!’ These are smoke in My nostrils, a fire that burns all the day” (Isa. 65:2, 5).

Upon reading this passage, our minds run immediately to the Pharisees, those preening, self-righteous hypocrites who were such a thorn in Jesus’ side during His ministry. But the Pharisees did not come into existence until several centuries after Isaiah wrote these words, so he clearly was targeting someone else. Who were they?

The immediate context provides some helpful clues. These people offered sacrifices in gardens and on crude altars (v. 3), which is indicative of idolatry. They also spent their nights “in the tombs,” apparently a reference to necromancy—seeking contact with the dead (v. 4a). Finally, they ate swine’s flesh (v. 4b), a sacrilege that no self-respecting Jew would commit. Unlike the Pharisees, whose self-righteousness was rooted in their professed respect for

God, these people provoked God “to My face” (v. 3); that is, they were defiant in their rebellion against God, and dared Him to do anything about it. Their holier-than-thou attitude grew, therefore, not out of a conviction that they were *closer* to God than others, but out of an arrogance that, unlike their unenlightened neighbors, they *didn’t need God at all*. Morally and spiritually, they were polar opposites of the Pharisees.

Haughty self-righteousness is not the exclusive property of pious believers. The most anti-religious atheist can be just as bigoted and full of himself as any right-wing religious kook. The problem here is not the role of religion, but the condition of the human heart. *Pride* is a universal evil that can take many forms, with or without faith, and a condescending attitude toward others is a common expression of that pride.

This has become increasingly obvious in recent years with the growth of atheism as a popular alternative to religion. The latest generation of atheists call themselves “Brights,” implying (despite their objections to the contrary)

that those who do not accept their naturalistic view of reality are dim and unintelligent. The fury with which they attack religion often has been compared to the rabid rantings of fundamentalist preachers; only the target of their hysteria is different. After all, it really is tough to be humble when you just *know* that you have all the answers, and your opponents are ignoramuses.

Whether militant skeptic or snooty Pharisee, viewing oneself as superior to others is a sure sign of a serious deficiency of humility. No matter how close to God we may be (or far from Him, depending on our perspective), none of us have all the answers, and we only make ourselves look foolish when we pretend that we do. There is certainly nothing wrong with having convictions and expressing them vigorously; but we should do so with a healthy dose of meekness, knowing that there is still much to learn—even from those who we are tempted to despise.

In the end, it is the humble person who will grow the most and make the fewest unforced errors.

– David King