

## Filthy Rags

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The Bible teaches that we cannot save ourselves by our own good works. But while affirming our impotence, we must be careful not to overstate the case.

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*“We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isa. 64:6).*



Those who believe in the total depravity of man often use this verse to support the idea that, even at our best, the good works that we do are worthless and detestable in the sight of God. However hard we may try, our best performance is only “filthy rags” before a holy God. Is that what Isaiah is saying?

First, such an interpretation flies in the face of other simple statements that applaud our efforts to do what is right. God acknowledged that Noah was “righteous before Me in this generation” (Gen. 7:1). “God is with the generation of the righteous” (Psa. 14:5). “In every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Ac. 10:35). At least in some sense, humans are capable of a righteousness that God recognizes and appreciates.

But we don’t have to leave the context itself to recognize a problem with this dark view of humanity. Look at the preceding verse: “You meet him who rejoices and does righteousness, who remembers You in Your ways” (64:5). How can God in one verse accept someone who does righteousness, then turn around and reject that

righteousness as “filthy rags” in the very next verse? There is something else going on in the context that deserves closer attention.

Elsewhere, the Bible refers to God’s people being “arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, *for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints*” (Rev. 19:8; emphasis mine). This clothing metaphor describes the quality of the service we offer to God. Read the surrounding chapters in Isaiah and it becomes clear that the “righteousness” of which Isaiah speaks is the phony, hypocritical service being offered by his countrymen. The pretend “righteousness” they offered to God was a joke, a mockery of everything that God stood for. There was no “fine linen” among these people; just “filthy rags” that disgusted the God they claimed to serve.

But why does Isaiah include himself in this description (“we,” “our,” “us”)? This is not a personal confession, but prophetic language in which the prophet speaks as a representative of his people. Compare Dan. 9:3-19, where Daniel in similar manner confesses the terrible sins of his people as though they were his own.

Ironically, even John Calvin himself—the ultimate Calvinist—understood this passage as an indictment of wicked Judah, and not of the entire human race. In his commentary on Isaiah he wrote: “There are some who frequently quote this passage, in order to prove that so far are our works from having any merit in them, that they are rotten and loathsome in the sight of God. But this appears to me to be at variance with the Prophet’s meaning, who does not speak of the whole human race, but describes the complaint of those who, having been led into captivity, experienced the wrath of the Lord against them, and therefore, acknowledged that they and their righteousnesses were like a filthy garment.”

To be sure, all the deeds of righteousness we may perform are not sufficient to offset the penalty of sin we have earned by our failures (Tit. 3:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:9; etc.). Our goodness will always be incomplete and inadequate. Salvation, therefore, is first and foremost an undeserved gift from a merciful God.

But that is not the same as saying that *nothing* we do is of any value to God. God is proud of whatever good we may accomplish, given the natural limitations with which we must work. However meager our efforts may be, He expects us to do our best. And He will “meet him who rejoices and does righteousness” (Isa. 64:5).

— David King