

James Boice



How to
Find Hope



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) was the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from 1968 to 2000. During that time, he took up the mantle of Dr. Donald Barnhouse's Evangelical Ministries, which reorganized in 1994 as the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.

James Boice served as the chairman of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), which in 1978 drafted the seminal "Chicago Statement." He also served as assistant editor of *Christianity Today*, and as editor of *Eternity Magazine*. James Boice's Bible teaching continues on *The Bible Study Hour* radio and internet program, which prepares listeners to think and act biblically.

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Several years ago in Europe, evangelist Billy Graham had the opportunity to speak to one of the world's great statesmen. As Dr. Graham crossed the room toward him, this statesman rose from the chair behind his desk saying, "I am an old man. Life has lost all meaning, and I am about to take a fateful leap into the unknown. Young man, is there any hope?"

We live in a day when the hope of a previous generation seems to be empty, when depravity is increasing, when youth are dropping out of society, and when the men who are closest to the problems of race, war and economics seem to be least optimistic. We live in a day when many are asking quite openly, "Is there any hope for man?"

Some say, of course, that man's only hope rests in himself—in his ability and his own goodness. But frankly, if human goodness is all we can count on, we are still quite hopeless, because human goodness will never please God. It is certainly much better to be surrounded by honest, upright, sensitive persons than scoundrels. But the important point is that human goodness is not good enough for God. And this means that although it will see a man through this life, often with flying colors, it will not see him to heaven.

There are several reasons for this. First, man's righteousness falls short of the standards set by God. Righteousness is one of those things, like perfection or wholeness, that loses its meaning entirely if you divide it. Perfection is a whole. You cannot be half-perfect.

To be half-perfect is to be imperfect; it is not perfection at all. You cannot have a whole half of an orange. You either have a whole orange or you have part of an orange. Righteousness is exactly the same. You are either completely righteous by God's definition or you are not righteous at all. Thus, Jesus taught, in what is undoubtedly the most important verse in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be ye, therefore, perfect, as your Father, who is in heaven, is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). That is the standard. All men fall short of it, and falling short of it, they miss it all.

If you have a boat tied up to a dock by a chain that has ten links in it, how many links do you have to break in order to set it adrift? Just one! And if you have a churning cataract 50 yards downriver, the boat will go over it and be destroyed just as easily with one link broken as with all ten. It is the same spiritually. Some men break all of the links of God's law, and we call them criminals or murderers. We put them in prison if we can catch them. Other people carefully pry open just one of the links, and we try to overlook it since all of us are at least that guilty. But all are adrift and headed toward the cataract. That is what is meant when we say that all men are equally unrighteous from God's point of view.

Second, the righteousness of which men are so proud is an external righteousness. Jesus knew men. And He knew that although the scribes and Pharisees were taking a great deal of trouble to shine up the outside of their lives, they were nevertheless unable to do anything about the true state of their hearts. In their hearts they were as sinful and, therefore, as unacceptable to God as anybody. On one occasion He said, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27). Moreover, what Jesus said of the Pharisees is true of every life. To a certain extent you and I can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps morally. If you are an alcoholic, you can discipline yourself to attend the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and get rid of the habit of drink. You can

get control of yourself and enter into a useful life. People will even admire you for having overcome this weakness of character. But although you can do all this outwardly, you cannot do anything about your inner nature.

You can be scrupulous in the affairs of your life, so that you are not the least bit dishonest in business. But you cannot make your heart loving if *you* are not loving. You cannot make it humble if *you* are not humble. You cannot make it pure if *you* are not pure. Hence, the reason why human righteousness will not get anywhere with God is that the only righteousness of which we are capable is external. This in itself produces hopelessness. God demands a transformation of the heart.

Third, human goodness even at best is polluted by sin. When I lived in Switzerland, an epidemic of typhoid broke out in Zermatt. Zermatt is one of those beautiful mountain villages nestled at the foot of the Matterhorn. The road is too steep for cars, and the only entry to the village is by cogwheel railroad. Everything is peaceful in the village. It is idyllic. If there were ever Paradise on earth, it would be Zermatt. But typhoid had broken out, and it was some time before they found out the source of the trouble. One of a group of young people who were camping on the outskirts of the villages had contracted typhoid. He had polluted a fresh mountain stream. Water from the stream had entered the water main at a point where it passed through the stream. The typhoid bacillus had bred in the pipe and had contaminated it.

Now, a person who did not understand the nature of disease might say, "But you cannot have any better water than the water that comes from the mountains. That is beautiful water; it comes from the melting glaciers." Yes, but men had contaminated the stream and the pipe. Consequently any water that went through the pipe thereafter was contaminated also. It could have been distilled water; it still carried death.

So, too, with human righteousness. We do good things, but all of our good deeds, even the best of them, are contaminated by sin. And because sin is there, sin always breaks forth into death. That is why the noblest ideals and most sublime ideologies of men often lead to the most devilish actions in practice.

Fourth, the pursuit of human goodness blinds men to their true condition before Him. I remember seeing a movie years ago in which a number of men in canoes were racing each other on a river. They were paddling as fast as they could go. First one man would get ahead, and then another man would get ahead. But the joke of the movie was that the water was moving down the stream faster than their boats were moving up. And so, although they were racing one another as fast as their paddles could take them, all the while they were being swept toward a waterfall. In the final scene all the boats went over the waterfall backwards together.

That is what men are doing. They have their minds so much on themselves that they do not see that the goodness of which they are capable is not taking them anywhere. The pursuit of human goodness is hopeless. God will not deal in that sort of thing. Instead, He wants us to look up to Him as the One who will take us out of the river entirely.

Back in the early part of the 20th century there was a well-known gangster in New York by the name of "Two-Gun Crowley." Two-Gun Crowley was the kind of person who killed easily without any apparent qualms. One day when he was parked by the side of the road in his car a policeman walked up and asked to see his license. Instead of producing it, Crowley pulled out a gun and shot the policeman. As the officer lay prostrate on the ground Crowley leaped from his car, took the officer's gun and fired five more shots into his body. That was the kind of man he was. The time came, however, when the police cornered Crowley in his girlfriend's apartment in one of the more fashionable districts of the city. Crowley was captured and sent to Sing Sing.

Now we ask, "What did a man like that think of himself?" Surely he must have known what he was like and said, "I am a bad man; I kill people." But that was not the case. We know what he thought of himself because of the blood-stained note he wrote while shooting it out with the police: "Under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one—one that would do nobody any harm." Later, when he was sitting in death row waiting to be executed, did he say, "This is what I get for killing policemen?" No, what he said was, "This is what I get for defending myself."

Here is another example. A man once said, "I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, and all I get is abuse, the existence of a hunted man." That was Al Capone speaking, one of the most notorious gangsters of the Chicago gangland era.

The point is this: If men like Two-Gun Crowley and Al Capone did not recognize the evil in their characters, how much less do the so-called moral people of our society recognize it. And yet, from God's perspective they need to see it all the same. We need to see it. So the fourth reason why God will not deal in human goodness is that it blinds men to their true condition.

Fifth, human righteousness is actually a different kind of righteousness from that which God demands. God asks for divine righteousness, and human righteousness is not divine righteousness at all.

The accumulation of human righteousness is like playing the game of Monopoly. The object of the game is to collect as much money and property as one can. The game is enjoyable, but only a fool would take his Monopoly earnings and go into town to buy groceries. Monopoly is a game, and a different currency is used in the real world. It is the same spiritually. And yet, although this is true, there are people who think that they are collecting assets before God when they are only collecting human righteousness. And God tells us that we must leave the play currency to deal in

His currency—His goodness. Man's goodness has no real value in heaven.

Most people think of goodness much in the way we think of light. That is, they acknowledge that it takes different forms and has varying degrees of intensity, but they believe that basically it is the same thing wherever you find it. At the bottom there is light that you cannot even see. A little higher up the scale there is the dull light that you might find in a cave somewhere that comes from decaying bacteria. There is the kind of light men produce by incandescence. Then there is the light of the sun on a dark day, followed by the light of the sun on a bright day. And then there is the light produced on the surface of the sun itself. Men say, "Well, that is the way it is with righteousness. The light of decaying bacteria corresponds to the tiny flickers of goodness that are in the worst of men. Most of us resemble incandescent bulbs. Some are the light of the sun on a dark day. And then there is God, and He is like the sun itself."

God says that is all wrong. He says that you can pile human goodness upon human goodness upon human goodness upon human goodness, you can refine it, sharpen it, polish it—but no matter how hard you try you will always fall short of His standard because human righteousness is qualitatively different from the righteousness of God. It belongs to a different realm entirely.

For instance, if human goodness can be compared to light, then God's goodness must not be compared to light too, but to something like life. For that reason God says that He cannot work with the good deeds that come from men, however much we may think of them, and instead asks us to receive the righteousness of Christ. This is what the Son of God came to earth to make possible. His coming to earth (and particularly His death) did two things. First, it was the means by which God punished sin and thereby removed the guilt of sin from the sinner. And, second, it was the means by which God revealed His offer of righteousness to men. The point of it all is that men become right before God not

because of anything they do or can do, but solely on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done. It is through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that a person receives God's righteousness and becomes acceptable before Him.

This is the basis of our hope. The world will ask, "Young men, is there any hope?" but it will not find hope in man's doings. We can joyfully answer, "Yes, there is hope. Our hope is in Christ and in true Christianity."

Shortly after our second daughter was born, my wife and I went shopping one day in a large department store that was then in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. We had the baby with us, sitting in one of those small infant seats and dressed in a yellow outfit with a green blanket. When we entered the store she had fallen asleep in her seat. And since we wanted to shop more freely, we placed her asleep in her seat on the top of a dress display in the infants' department.

It happened that there was also a display on the top of the dress rack, and the display was arranged with yellow and green material. We did not pay much attention to the decorations and instead went on with our shopping. A few minutes later we turned around to see a crowd gathered about the display where the baby was apparently just beginning to squirm a bit, prior to waking up. We were just in time to hear one woman say to another, "I think it runs on batteries." Another chimed in, "Well, they certainly make them real these days." Unfortunately, what was true in the shopping center is also often true of Christianity, for many mistake what is real for something artificial. And some mistake an artificial thing for Christianity.

Late in 1967 the Soviet Union launched a space probe designed to crash upon the surface of Venus and to send back vital statistics about its surface temperature and atmospheric pressure. When the space probe ceased transmitting at 3,774 miles from the center of the planet, presumably because it had struck the surface, the

temperature reading was 520 degrees Fahrenheit and the atmosphere 12 to 20 times greater than the atmosphere on earth. This information seemed unquestionable in spite of several reasons for thinking differently, and it suggested that there might be life on Venus.

Shortly thereafter, however, scientists determined that the radius of Venus is only 3,759 miles, meaning that the Russian ship ceased transmitting when it was still 15 miles above the surface of the planet. Consequently, all of its figures were misleading. It gave the temperature 15 miles above the planet's surface, but it did not provide the information that the scientists most wanted to know. Actually, the surface temperature of Venus is now known to be close to 900 degrees Fahrenheit and the pressure 75 to 100 times that on the surface of the earth. At that temperature and at that pressure life as we know it here is impossible.

In the same way, thousands of well-meaning people stop receiving data when they are miles from the heart of Christianity. For many people, a knowledge of Christianity stops at contact with those who claim to be Christians. They identify Christianity with so-called Christian character, and since many believers are far from what God intends them to be, these data gives a false impression.

Other people actually get into the atmosphere, perhaps as far as the organization, and then they conclude that Christianity is the visible church. This is like identifying life with a test tube full of chemicals, and this impression is misleading also. Other people get as far as the ceremonies of the church and often pass for Christians because they participate properly. The fact that so many congregations are filled with people who have gone no further than this is certainly one reason for the weakness of the Christian Church today.

Some people actually come as close as the creeds, and they can recite them with much volume: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ his only

Son, Our Lord." Unfortunately, this too is less than Christianity, important as the creeds may be.

Christianity is a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. And nothing about Christianity will be rightly understood until there is faith in Christ and a personal relationship with Him. If you are to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, you must begin with the fact that you need Him. And the reason you need Him is that you cannot please God or satisfy God by yourself: this can only be done if God, who is able, will do it for us. If you are to experience the hope, certainty and blessing that the Christian gospel offers, you must begin with the principle that you can receive it only as God's gift through Jesus Christ, and not by your own efforts.

Actually, Jesus Himself taught this in the Sermon on the Mount. He had been speaking to many of the common people. But as He had been speaking, many of the scribes and Pharisees had been listening also. These men thought that they had been scrupulous in interpreting and obeying the Law. They thought that if anyone had earned the favor of God, it was they. However, Jesus said, "For I say unto you that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). In other words, He was saying that God will never be satisfied even with such a supposed high standard of righteousness as theirs.

This was a difficult saying, of course, and it was difficult for a number of reasons. First, because the scribes and the Pharisees were so highly regarded.

Jesus' words were also difficult, however, because He was not saying that in order for a man to get to heaven he must have a slightly higher degree of the same kind of righteousness that the scribes and Pharisees had been accumulating. He was saying that if a man wants to get to heaven he must somehow have a different and better righteousness than these men were showing. And this means that he must turn his back on human goodness altogether

and receive instead the freely offered goodness of God. The Phillips translation of the New Testament makes this a little clearer by saying, "For I tell you that your goodness must be a far better thing than the goodness of the scribes and Pharisees before you can set foot in the kingdom of heaven at all."

Many years ago there was a Pharisee who found that these things were indeed true and who experienced a transformation of his life as a result. He is probably the best-known rabbi that ever lived. At any rate, he was certainly the one most effective in changing the history of the world. His name was Paul. In his youth he had gloried in his achievement as a Pharisee. He had achieved everything from the point of view of the Pharisee. Yet near the end of his life when he looked back to add it all up, he recognized that it came to nothing and that the only thing that counted was Christ.

Before this happened he thought that he had attained to righteousness by keeping his conception of God's law. Afterward he knew that all of this righteousness was as dirty in God's sight as filthy rags. He had once said, "As touching the righteousness that is in the law I am blameless." He now said, "I am the chief of sinners."

When he met Christ he came to know what righteousness was. And as he looked at all the things that he had been accumulating in the white light of God's righteousness, these things seemed filthy. He had no other words for them but "dung." He crossed it all out, and, thus, he moved the whole column of things he had considered assets over into the column of liabilities. He said, "These things have actually kept me from God's righteousness." And under the column of assets he wrote "Jesus Christ alone."

That is what salvation is all about. Is that what you believe? Or are you still among those who are spending a lifetime accumulating things that you think are going to earn heaven? Are you trying to persuade God to adopt your method of bookkeeping? God writes that all men are sinners. "For there is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the

way, they are together become unprofitable, there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Romans 3:10-12). And perhaps you are trying to say that although that may be true of other persons, it is certainly not true of you. If you are doing that, you are actually measuring yourself by other men. And God is measuring you by His own standard of moral perfection, which is the perfection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Are you trusting in the kind of goodness that will never be accepted by God? If you are, you must learn that your goodness will keep you from God. However, if you will lay your goodness aside, counting it loss, God will credit Jesus Christ to your account, "who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

This has always been the heart of Christian experience, and it has been embodied in many of our hymns. One of them says:

*Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress, Helpless, look to thee for grace,
Foul, I to the Fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die.*

Rock of ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in thee.¹

If you will pray that prayer, God will wash you. God will cleanse you. And He will give you the righteousness that is above anything that man can attain and receive you on the basis of that righteousness into fellowship with Himself, both now and one day soon in heaven.

Notes:

1. "Rock of Ages" Words: Augustus M. Toplady, 1776. Music: Toplady, Thomas Hastings, 1830.

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600 Eden Road · Lancaster, PA 17601
215-546-3696 · (fax) 215-735-5133
AllianceNet.org