

Luke 16:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

Analysis

And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God. Jesus exposes the Pharisees' fatal error: self-justification. The phrase 'justify yourselves' (δικαιοῦντες ἑαυτούς, dikaiountes heautous) means they declared themselves righteous based on external conformity to law and human standards. They performed righteousness 'before men' (ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀνθρώπων, enōpion tōn anthrōpōn) to gain human approval and admiration.

But Jesus pronounces devastating truth: 'God knoweth your hearts' (οὐ θεὸς γινώσκει τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν, ho theos ginōskei tas kardias hymōn). The verb ginōskei (γινώσκει) indicates thorough, experiential knowledge—God sees past external appearance to internal reality. Human estimation means nothing; divine knowledge exposes everything. The climax is shocking: 'that which is highly esteemed among men' (τὸ ἐν ἀνθρώποις ὑψηλόν, to en anthrōpois hypsēlon)—what culture exalts, like wealth, status, and religious performance—is abomination in the sight of God' (βδέλυγμα ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ, bdelygma enōpion tou theou). The term bdelygma (βδέλυγμα) means something detestable, disgusting, worthy of God's revulsion.

This reversal of values demolishes human pride. What impresses people—wealth,

religious credentials, social status—disgusts God when pursued for self-glory. God values the humble heart, contrite spirit, and genuine faith (Isaiah 57:15, 66:2). Self-justification is the essence of false religion; justification by grace through faith alone is the gospel.

Historical Context

The Pharisees epitomized self-justification. They fasted, tithed meticulously, prayed publicly, and maintained ritual purity (Luke 18:11-12). These practices earned widespread respect—Pharisees were honored as the most righteous people in society. Yet Jesus consistently condemned them as hypocrites (Matthew 23), whitewashed tombs beautiful outside but full of death inside (Matthew 23:27).

The Greek word for 'abomination' (bdelygma) appears in the Septuagint for idolatry and sexual immorality—the grossest sins in Jewish theology. Jesus uses this extreme term for self-righteous religion that seeks human approval while harboring covetousness, pride, and hardness toward the poor. This teaching challenges every form of performance-based religion that trusts external conformity rather than internal transformation. Paul later developed this theology extensively in Romans and Galatians, insisting justification comes by faith, not works.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How do Christians today 'justify themselves before men' through religious performance while God sees covetous or proud hearts?
2. What things highly esteemed in modern culture might be abomination to God—wealth, success, fame, power, physical beauty?

3. How does God's knowledge of your heart (not just external behavior) either comfort or challenge you?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	εἶπεν	αὐτοῖς	‘Υμεῖς	ἐστε	οἱ	δικαιοῦντες	ἐαυτοὺς
And	he said	unto them	Ye	are	G3588	they which justify	yourselves
G2532	G2036	G846	G5210	G2075		G1344	G1438
ἐνώπιον	τῶν	ἀνθρώποις	ό	δὲ	θεοῦ	γινώσκει	τὰς
before	G3588	men	G3588	but	God	knoweth	G3588
G1799		G444		G1161	G2316	G1097	
καρδίας	ὑμῶν·	ὅτι	τὸ	ἐν	ἀνθρώποις		
hearts	your	for	G3588	among	men		
G2588	G5216	G3754		G1722	G444		
ὑψηλὸν		βδέλυγμα	ἐνώπιον	τοῦ	θεοῦ	ἐστιν	
that which is highly esteemed		abomination	before	G1799	G3588	God	is
G5308		G946				G2316	G2076

Additional Cross-References

1 Samuel 16:7 (Parallel theme): But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

Proverbs 21:2 (Parallel theme): Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts.

Jeremiah 17:10 (Parallel theme): I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

1 Corinthians 4:5 (References God): Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and

will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

Proverbs 16:5 (Parallel theme): Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.

Acts 15:8 (References God): And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;

1 Peter 3:4 (References God): But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

Luke 11:39 (Parallel theme): And the Lord said unto him, Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter; but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness.

1 Chronicles 29:17 (References God): I know also, my God, that thou triest the heart, and hast pleasure in uprightness. As for me, in the uprightness of mine heart I have willingly offered all these things: and now have I seen with joy thy people, which are present here, to offer willingly unto thee.

Luke 10:29 (Righteousness): But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?